

REDISCOVERING HOME:

# Proximity Tourism as a Pathway to Otherness and Psychological Ownership

A case study of Rijeka, Croatia



Master thesis

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# Abstract

This thesis explores how proximity tourism enhances residents' quality of life by fostering a sense of otherness and psychological ownership. Through a case study of Rijeka, Croatia, and in collaboration with Urbani separe collective, the research focuses on how activities like guided city tours and participatory workshops enable residents to rediscover their city. Through the adoption of a 'tourist gaze', participants see familiar spaces in new ways, constructing otherness and deepening their connections to the city. This process fosters psychological ownership which fulfils needs for efficacy, self-identity, and belonging. Using qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and a guided city tour, the study reveals that proximity tourism positively impacts residents' quality of life. The findings highlight proximity tourism as a regenerative form of tourism that strengthens communities. By encouraging residents to engage with their city in new ways, proximity tourism not only enriches their lives but also redefines their relationship with their urban environment.



# Personal note and acknowledgments

When I was in high school, I often thought of my hometown, Rijeka, as a boring place with little to do and nowhere to go. It wasn't until I moved to the Netherlands for my bachelor's degree that I began to notice the things I had left behind. Now, after five years being away, I find myself living in Rijeka again, and though the city itself hasn't changed much, it feels as though I've stepped into a parallel universe where Rijeka has become everything I once hoped it could be. There are countless places to explore, from the sea to the mountains, abandoned buildings are just waiting to be explored, every neighbourhood has its own unique story, and the city centre holds memories of all the different nationalities Rijeka has been a home to.

Working on this thesis has allowed me to practice the very concept of proximity tourism that I explore in this research. At the beginning, I had a vision to use only my photographs in this report, which meant spending a few days wandering the city, capturing its essence. Through this process, I discovered that by simply shifting my perspective - both literally and figuratively - Rijeka revealed itself as a far more beautiful and fascinating place than I had ever imagined. This experience has left me with a wish: for everyone, no matter where you live, to open your eyes and notice how marvellous the places we live in are. We don't need to travel to the other side of the world to witness remarkable beauty and meet fascinating people - they're often just around the corner, waiting to be discovered.

Collaborating with Urbani separe and working on this topic in my own city has been a transformative experience. It has introduced me to like-minded individuals and has shown me many kind and creative people that are actively working to preserve and revitalise it. To the participants of this study, thank you for sharing your passion and for showing me that this work is worth doing. I am deeply grateful for your time and openness to share your experiences. Your stories and insights have been the heart of this research, and I am honoured to have had the opportunity to learn from you.

I would also like to express my thanks to Urbani separe for their collaboration and for providing me with the opportunity to conduct this research. Their dedication to community engagement and urban revitalisation has been a constant source of inspiration.

Finally, I want to thank my supervisor, Karolina Doughty, for her guidance and support throughout this journey. What I appreciate the most is how she encouraged me to take ownership of my work. Rather than steering me in specific directions, she gave me the freedom to develop my own ideas and make my own decisions, which helped me grow as a researcher. Her trust in me, along with her thoughtful feedback and encouragement, made this thesis possible. I am truly grateful for her patience and for creating a space in which I could learn and grow.

Dear reader, I hope this research inspires you to rediscover your own surroundings and appreciate the beauty and potential that lie within your everyday environment!

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# 1. Introduction

We humans often think we have to travel great lengths, across seas and oceans to find unfamiliar and exhilarating cultures. We spend enormous amounts of money, time and effort chasing extraordinary experiences in faraway places. Little do we know that the sensations we are chasing might be found just around the corner...

As an answer to the accelerated global mobility and the growing scale of tourism (Richards, 2016), in recent years there has been an increased focus on a future of tourism that is slow, grounded, and deeply connected to local contexts (Salmela et al., 2021). As more and more tourists have explored the well-known highlights of other cultures, they increasingly seek out the less familiar aspects that are physically closer to them (Richards, 2016). Thus, the notion of tourism is changing meaning and the distinction between tourism and everyday life is becoming increasingly blurred (Diaz-Soria, 2017). As an adaptive response, there is a growing interest in proximity tourism (Hoogendoorn & Hammett, 2021) which emphasises unfamiliar yet close destinations (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Considering that the modern urban residents tend to experience the city not as a whole, but as a collection of enclaves, other parts of the city remain as unknown as exotic, faraway tourism destinations. This opens up significant opportunities for dwellers to become “tourists in their own city” (Richards, 2016).

Being a tourist is not a passive attitude, in reality it involves the intentional adoption of a ‘tourist gaze,’ which fosters a sense of psychological distance from the destination and shifts the perspective of tourists to see things through a new, exploratory lens (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Salmela et al., 2021). This enables tourists to fulfil the need for ‘otherness’, allowing them to perceive environments in a way that makes the known feel unknown, which transforms ordinary experiences into something exceptional (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Salmela et al., 2021). Meanwhile, as human beings, we all have a fundamental need for belongingness (Maslow, 1943). People want to feel comfortable and safe within their families, communities, neighbourhoods and hometowns (Dawkins et al., 2017). Psychological ownership, a state where individuals perceive a place, object, or idea as intimately connected to their identity and self- concept, fulfils the needs for control, self-expression, and belonging (Dawkins et al., 2017). It nurtures the human desire to belong and through that, creates a feeling of “this is my place” (Pierce et al., 2003). These two needs seem contradictory - one pushing people to seek faraway places, constantly experiencing new things, while the other is pulling them to stay, to build a home in which they feel physically and psychologically safe (Pierce et al., 2003). But is it possible for these needs to coexist and complement each other? As Salmela et al. (2021) note “The idea of having to go far away to experience something that is considered valuable takes something away from our commitment to local places, making them seem potentially less valuable to care for or too mundane for exceptionality” (p.57). Therefore, proximity tourism presents an interesting direction for the development of tourism that allows resident tourists to experience feelings of ‘otherness’, while simultaneously developing a sense of psychological ownership towards their surroundings.

In recent years there has been a growing academic interest in proximity tourism. Researchers have started exploring the possibility of adopting a tourist perspective within a nearby and familiar setting. Additionally, they have explored the motives, process and effects of proximity tourism on the individuals who participate, highlighting the concept of 'otherness'. Rather than being tied to geographical distance, otherness emerges from the psychological, cultural, or social unfamiliarity with one's own environment (Hoogendoorn & Hammett, 2021; Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2017; Salmela et al., 2017). Its construction is a subjective process through which individuals consciously adopt a tourist's gaze to distance themselves from a close and familiar place in order to approach it anew (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Salmela et al., 2017). Ultimately, it allows individuals to see the exotic within the mundane, transforming the way they engage with their local spaces (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Salmela et al., 2017). Furthermore, some scholars have investigated the potential of proximity tourism as a means to address tourism-related challenges such as seasonality, the loss of local heritage, travel-related pollution and inequality within the tourism sector. However, proximity tourism has not yet been investigated through the lens of psychological ownership (PO). Previous research on PO has mostly been applied to management disciplines (organisation-based PO) and marketing research. In tourism, psychological ownership has been explored in contexts such as destination attachment, where residents develop emotional and functional ties to a place (Zhang & Xu, 2019; Guan et al., 2024). Additionally, studies have shown that tourists' sense of ownership over souvenirs or destinations can enhance their perceived value and authenticity, enriching their travel experiences (Deng et al., 2021; Kuman & Nayak, 2019). While a few articles have been written exploring PO in the context of tourism, there has been no research conducted that investigates psychological ownership in tourism with the aim of enhancing the quality of life of local residents.

This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the notion of proximity tourism and its relation to the development of PO and the experience of 'otherness'. Since one of the core motives to engage in tourism activities is to experience places, people and elements out of the ordinary, and a fundamental human need is to attain a sense of belonging that can be fostered through PO, this study centres around the question: *How can proximity tourism impact residents' quality of life by enhancing a sense of otherness and psychological ownership?*

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Proximity tourism and 'otherness'

As a relatively new form of tourism, proximity tourism has seen limited theoretical and conceptual development, with a relatively scarce amount of published research on the topic (López Sánchez et al., 2022; Salmela et al., 2021). However, some scholars have begun to explore it. López Sánchez et al. (2022) define proximity tourism as "those experiences that take place during a day in a location close to the place of residence, so they do not require overnight accommodation, whose focus is to know an unfamiliar nearby place" (p.2458). Other definitions emphasise its environmentally friendly aspects, describing it as "a form of tourism that emphasises local destinations, short distances, and lower-carbon modes of transportations" (Salmela et al., 2021, p.47). However, due to the subjective nature of the concept of 'proximity', which can be interpreted differently based on its geographical and cultural aspects, proximity tourism lacks a clear definition (Zhang et al., 2024). Frequently,

scholars describe the concept of proximity tourism as being grounded in the idea that, in a highly mobile world where individuals take on the role of tourists and any location can serve as a destination, tourism experiences become deeply embedded in everyday life (Hoogendoorn & Hammett, 2021; Richards, 2016; Salmela et al., 2021). This shift means that such experiences no longer require extensive travel but instead emerge as a dynamic process of constructing meaning through local engagement.

Proximity tourism can be viewed as a fresh approach to addressing some of the prominent issues in tourism and beyond. For instance, it tackles the issue of seasonality, making touristic activities accessible year-round (Salmela et al., 2021). It also offers the potential to rediscover and reinterpret local heritage elements that may have lost their original significance (Soria & Coit., 2013). On a societal level, proximity tourism can be seen as a way to foster equality, enabling people from various social classes to participate in the same experiences (Salmela et al., 2021). Moreover, through the conscious application of a tourist gaze, residents can shift their perception of the place from mere functional meaning to the aesthetically appealing elements around them (Salmela et al., 2021). Therefore, proximity tourism activities provide opportunities to enhance aesthetic experiences of both mundane tasks and mundane environments, increasing the value of usual environments and encouraging a development process (Soria & Coit., 2013).

A person who resides in a particular place yet engages in touristic exploration of it can be regarded as a resident tourist. Unlike traditional tourists, resident tourists' standpoint includes both physical and psychological proximity with the destination. However, both groups share curiosity and interest as motivations to participate in tourism activities (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Proximity tourism indicates the heterogeneity of roles resident tourists play, experiencing a place both as a tourist and as a resident (Salmela et al., 2021); "they live in the destination...they are totally immersed in it...they pretend to be tourists...they are more critical and notice aesthetical aspects of these places more easily than during their everyday life" (Diaz-Soria, 2017, p.5). The touristic experiences resident tourists engage in might have an influence on how they use and interact with these places in the future (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Additionally, these experiences contribute to the construction of one's identity as the place becomes an extension of the self (Diaz-Soria, 2017).

The primary challenge of proximity tourism lies in the fact that its destinations are often too familiar to meet tourists' needs (Zhang et al., 2024). However, the essence of proximity tourism revolves around the construction of 'otherness'; a mindset shift that encourages rediscovery and exploration of local surroundings from a fresh perspective, enabling resident tourists to reshape their familiar environments (Zhang et al., 2024). Tourism scholarship has extensively regarded tourism as a means to escape the mundanity of everyday life and engage with otherness (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). However, unfamiliarity is associated with distant locations, often overlooking the exotic aspects of everyday life (Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2017). By recognising that exoticism is not inherently linked to geographical distance and that an 'unusual' environment can be spatially close, yet socially, culturally or psychologically distanced (Hoogendoorn & Hammett, 2021; Salmela et al., 2021), it becomes possible to "attribute otherness to and experience unfamiliarity in a geographically proximate environment, close to what we call 'home'" (Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2017, p.5). During proximity tourism activities, participants are exposed to new perspectives on their familiar environment, triggering cognitive dissonance, a discomfort caused by the clash between the familiar

and the newly perceived. To mitigate these negative feelings, they consciously adopt a tourist's gaze, distancing themselves from the familiar and approaching it anew (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Salmela et al., 2017). This shift in perception allows them to take in new information and integrate it with their existing knowledge, seamlessly constructing otherness. Encounters with otherness can challenge established worldviews, leading to cognitive, emotional, and relational uncertainty, which in turn motivates efforts to restore balance (Doubková et al., 2024). As a result, otherness becomes an adaptive process, acting as a catalyst for social and cultural change, while also fostering a personal transformation of an individual.

In tourism scholarship, engaging with otherness often carries a negative connotation. In the Foucauldian framework, the "Other" refers to individuals who are marginalised, oppressed, or disadvantaged by a specific discourse (Wearing & Darcy, 2011). This conceptualisation has been adopted in postcolonial theory and poststructural studies to examine the cultural representations inherent in the host-guest relationship (Wearing & Darcy, 2011). Exotic countries are often viewed as the "Other", positioning hosts as inferior to the tourist's original discourse, which is usually patriarchal and infused with Western knowledge (Wearing & Darcy, 2011). Therefore, "Otherness" is typically regarded as paternalistic and leading to manifestations of ethnocentrism (Korstanje, 2012). However, in this study and in the context of proximity tourism, otherness is not considered as a characteristic of the "Other" but represents all that is unknown about the destination to the resident tourist. It entails experiencing places, people, and activities that are familiar in a surprising and novel way. Through the adoption of a tourist's gaze, the construction of otherness is a central stimulus for participation in proximity tourism.

Beyond its theoretical implications, otherness can also have significant positive effects on an individual's quality of life, which is another central reason for studying it in the context of proximity tourism. By rediscovering familiar environments through fresh perspectives, individuals acquire deeper spatial and cultural knowledge (Diaz-Soria, 2017), fostering new insights about both the place and themselves. Hence, experiencing otherness provides cognitive stimulation, satisfying higher psychological needs such as self-actualisation, self-esteem, and connection. Additionally, confronting the initial discomfort of cognitive dissonance, individuals are encouraged to challenge their preconceived notions and develop critical new perspectives on their surroundings. In doing so, they transform their perceptions of the mundane, seeing their neighbourhoods in a more aesthetically pleasing light (Salmela et al., 2021), which contributes to a greater sense of material wellbeing (Felce et al., 1995). Ultimately, the experience of otherness within proximity tourism serves as a powerful catalyst for personal growth and an enhanced quality of life.

## 2.2 Psychological ownership

The second theoretical core of the research design is the concept of 'psychological ownership', an interdisciplinary concept recognised as a significant predictor of human motives, attitudes, and behaviours (Olckers & van Zyl, 2017). It is a psychological mechanism by which individuals develop close bonds with certain targets or objects of ownership (Hillenbrand & Money, 2015). One of the leading scholars in the field of psychological ownership is Jon L. Pierce, whose work has been widely cited in literature as he provided a theoretical and conceptual base for understanding diverse notions of the concept. Pierce et al (2003) have defined psychological ownership as "the state in

which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is “theirs” (p.86). In the heart of PO is a sense of possession, addressing the question “What do I feel is mine?” (Pierce et al., 2003). The state emerges because it serves three fundamental human needs; efficacy, self-identity, and belongingness (Dawkins et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2003). The first of these, efficacy, reflects the human need for control, with the desire to own being understood in a sense of power and powerlessness (Pierce et al., 2003). Moreover, possessions can serve as symbolic expressions of the self as they convey core values of an individual (Dawkins et al., 2017). This relationship was already noted by Sartre who stated that ““to have” is one of the three categories of human existence and that “the totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being...I am what I have...What is mine is myself” (Pierce et al., 2003, p.85). Finally, a sense of ownership fosters a sense of belonging which is crucial for experiencing comfort, pleasure and security (Dawkins et al., 2017). Each of these needs contributes to the development of PO (Pierce et al., 2003), which illustrates the significance of focusing on this concept.

Through serving the needs for efficacy, self-identity and belongingness, experiencing psychological ownership is closely related to heightened quality of life of an individual. Pierce et al. (2003) have highlighted several positive effects of PO. The most common reason why PO is considered as a subject of research is because it is positively related to citizenship behaviour. When people develop a sense of ownership toward a particular target, they are more inclined to exhibit citizenship behaviour directed at that target. (Pierce et al., 2003). Secondly, as an outcome of heightened PO, there is a greater willingness to make personal sacrifice and assume risk. Once a target becomes psychologically owned, any disruptions associated with it lead to a diminishment of the self. Thus, individuals will take more risks and personal sacrifices to protect the target (Pierce et al., 2003). Additionally, when individuals experience PO, they may perceive themselves as stewards and act in the best interest of the target rather than pursuing personal interests.

At times, psychological ownership can also lead to negative consequences. Individuals might become reluctant to share the target of ownerships, which can impede collaboration and result in territorial behaviour (Pierce et al., 2003). However, this depends on the conditions. Efficacy and control being primary motives for the ownership may be more dysfunctional than when the primary motives are self-identity or belonging (Pierce et al., 2003). Another important critique to consider is that PO might be culturally specific. PO is based on the assumption that societies function around a shared concept of ownership (Nijs et al., 2024). However, by putting possessions at the centre of social dynamics, this assumption reflects a Western capitalist worldview. Furthermore, feelings of ownership may be present to a different extent in different cultures as PO is partly learned through socialisation and depends on structural aspects which are both culturally determined (Pierce et al., 2003). Lastly, psychological ownership is a relatively new and abstract concept, making it complex and challenging to study empirically.

As mentioned before, research on PO has mostly been applied to management disciplines, specifically organisational psychology. It has been utilised to investigate how employers develop feelings of psychological ownerships toward the organisation and how it impacts their work ethic and job satisfaction (Pierce et al., 2001). In their research, van Dyne & Pierce (2004), conclude that psychological ownership is positively related to organisational commitment, job satisfaction and organisation-based self-esteem. Other scholars, such as Olckers et al. (2020), Peng & Pierce (2015)

and Avey et al. (2012), believe that PO is associated with enhancing desired behaviour and decreasing undesired workplace behaviour, and therefore has unique explanatory power. Seckin et al. (2018) found that there is a positive relationship between perceived quality of work life and psychological ownership. Inspired by the arguments made in organisational psychology, some tourism scholars have explored the notion of psychological ownership. The focus has mainly been on the sense of PO tourists develop toward a destination during their visit. Research by Kumar & Nayak (2019) showed that a sense of PO among tourists leads to increased intentions to revisit and recommend the destination. Similarly, Deng et al. (2021) have confirmed that PO affects tourists' perceived value of tourism products, specifically souvenirs. There are a few articles that explore PO from the perspective of local residents. Study by Zhang & Xu (2019) concluded that residents who have a strong emotional and functional attachment to a destination are more likely to engage in positive behaviours that benefit that location. Moreover, Sau-Ching Yim (2021) found that when residents develop PO towards a particular travel destination, further development of tourism activities can be perceived as a threat to residents' sense of selves. In conclusion, while some previous research has explored the relationship between locals and psychological ownership, studies on PO in the context of tourism often primarily focus on destination marketing and branding efforts.

In this research, psychological ownership is studied as an outcome of proximity tourism activities. Pierce et al (2003) explain that PO emerges through three major experiences/routes; controlling the ownership target, coming to intimately know the target, and investing the self into the target. Proximity tourism does exactly that. Participating in its activities, residents get access to spatial and cultural knowledge, they are able to share their experiences and play part in decision-making, and the experience opens up possibilities for new ways of attachment to local heritage and development of identity features (Diaz-Soria, 2017). By analysing how proximity tourism strengthens residents' sense of psychological ownership, the goal is to determine how it enhances their overall quality of life. Additionally, proximity tourism can be seen as an alternative form of tourism, one that is grounded and has less negative environmental impact than traditional tourism. Therefore, it addresses larger societal challenges by considering better ways of doing tourism.

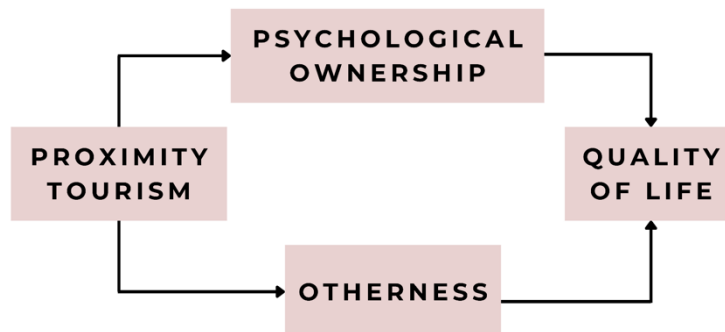
## 2.3 Conceptual model

In line with the theoretical framework, a conceptual model is developed that explains the interplay between proximity tourism, psychological ownership, otherness, and quality of life (see Figure 1). This model serves as a visual representation of the theoretical foundations of this study and provides a structured framework for investigating the interplay between these concepts.

During proximity tourism activities, due to the contrast between the known and newly perceived, participants experience a sense of discomfort (cognitive dissonance). To soothe this discomfort, they adopt a tourist gaze, allowing them to see their surroundings with fresh eyes (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Salmela et al., 2017). This shift in perspective leads to the construction of otherness, which becomes an adaptive process. The psychological balance is restored as participants re-engage with the familiar in novel ways, gaining new insights and deepening their understanding of their surroundings.



Through active engagement, participants develop a stronger psychological connection to the place, gaining access to previously unknown elements, exploring new meanings, their self-identity and its relationship to the place (Pierce et al., 2003). Over time, they establish deeper emotional ties to the place, fostering a sense of psychological ownership. Just when resident tourists begin to feel they fully understand their environment, proximity tourism offers new perspectives, re-starts the process. As a result, the construction of psychological ownership and otherness becomes an ongoing process as the complexity of the interplay between the two concepts allows for endless reinterpretations of a place.



**Figure 1**  
*Conceptual model*  
 Note. Illustration by the author.

As previously discussed, both psychological ownership and otherness can have positive effects on an individual's quality of life. While experiencing psychological ownership fulfils the human needs for belonging, control, and self-identity, otherness satisfies the desire for novelty, cognitive simulation, and self-actualisation. Ultimately, as the two experiences have diverse effects, their combination has a profound impact on the overall quality of life.

This study aims to explore the dynamics between the illustrated concepts with the goal of understanding how they collectively enhance quality of life. Therefore, the research focuses on the following question:

**RQ: *How can proximity tourism impact residents' quality of life by enhancing a sense of otherness and psychological ownership?***

### 3. Case study

To explore the complex interplay between proximity tourism, psychological ownership, otherness and quality of life in their real-world context, this paper employs a case study as the core research activity. Case study research is valuable for investigating phenomena where boundaries between subjects are not clearly defined and are suitable for answering “how” questions effectively (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019). As the goal of this research is to provide a depiction of the key concepts, a descriptive case study is employed (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019). The case study takes place in the city of Rijeka (Croatia), and it examines activities of Urbani separe association to investigate the key themes of this research.

### 3.1 About Rijeka

Rijeka, often referred to as “the city that flows” (*Grad koji teče*), is a city that lives alongside the Adriatic Sea (see Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2.**  
*Rijeka from distance.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 3.**  
*Rijeka at night.*  
Note. Photograph by Josip Cvitešić.

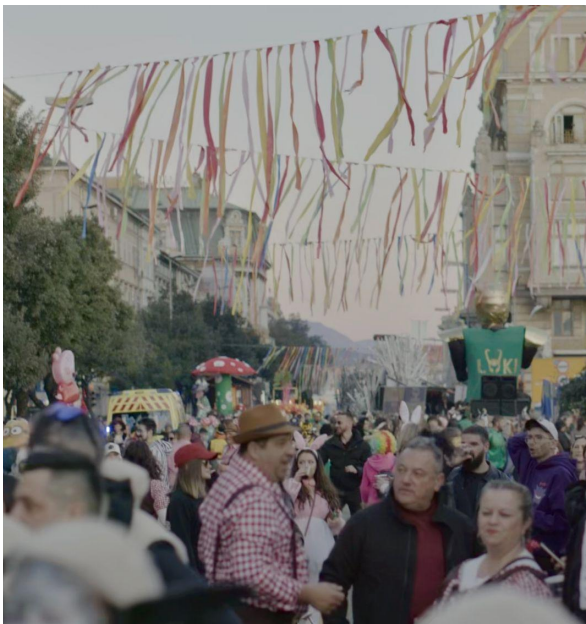
It is Croatia’s third-largest city and a key industrial and port hub (see Figure 4). In the past, some of the biggest industries of Croatia and Yugoslavia have been located in Rijeka such as the 3.MAJ shipyard, a sugar refinery, a paper mill, and most famously the torpedo factory, where the modern torpedo was invented. Although the city’s economy has been heavily reliant on shipbuilding, manufacturing, and trade, these sectors are facing decline in recent years with efforts to diversify the local economy focused on tourism and the service industry.



**Figure 4.**  
*Rijeka's Industry.*  
 Note. Photograph by the author.

Geographically, Rijeka's location along the coast offers a stunning landscape full of hills and valleys. The Rječina river, which serves as the main water source for all citizens of Rijeka, once divided the city in two during the 20th century, one side being under Italian territory and the other under Yugoslavian rule. This complex history has left Rijeka with a mix of nationalities, religions, and mentalities. Croats form the majority, but the presence of Serbs, Bosnians and Italians adds layers to the cultural richness. Yet, beneath this diversity lies a challenge: over half of Rijeka's population (55.73%) is aged between 40 and 79, indicating an aging demographic (City Population, 2024).

Art, especially music, has also shaped Rijeka's cultural identity, as it has for a long time been considered as a city of rock and punk. The city is also famous for its Rijeka Carnival, attracting thousands of visitors each year with its colourful parades, masks, and festive atmosphere (see Figures 5 and 6).



**Figure 5.**  
*Rijeka's Carnival.*  
 Note. Photograph by Mateo Jurčić.



**Figure 6.**  
*Rijeka's Carnival.*  
 Note. Photographed by Mateo Jurčić.



Walking through Rijeka, one will notice the contrasts that define the city. Old buildings that were once full of life now stand empty while the streets are often crowded with cars, showing that the city prioritises vehicles over pedestrians. The urban landscapes for many feel chaotic, with little room for green spaces. Yet, among this, there are glimpses of beauty and resilience. The famous Molo longo pier offers an escape where locals take walks and breathe in the sea air. When one looks closer, Rijeka reveals its charm in the details; cobblestone streets, colourful murals, and hidden courtyards tell stories of a city that, despite its struggles, has a unique character. The following figures capture the atmosphere of Rijeka, showcasing its contrasts.



**Figure 7.**  
*Street crowded with cars.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



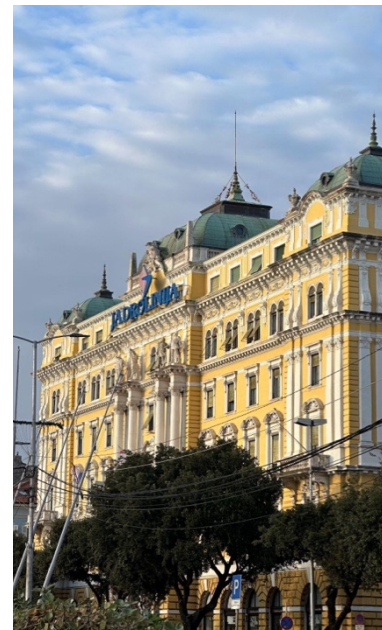
**Figure 8.**  
*Rijeka's Old Buildings.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 9.**  
*Stunning building.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 10.**  
*Charming facades.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 11.**  
*Jadrolinija Building.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.





**Figure 12.**  
*Hidden paths.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



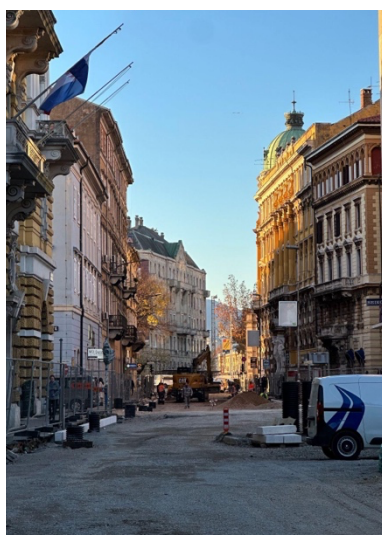
**Figure 13.**  
*Glimpses of beauty.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.

Today, Rijeka is facing a demographic decline, largely due to emigration of young people and families who are leaving the city in search of better living standards elsewhere (Rijeka Danas, 2024). The city potentially losing the status of a major city might have significant consequences on the livelihood of Rijeka and the quality of life of its residents. Therefore, effort must be put into improving the living standard.

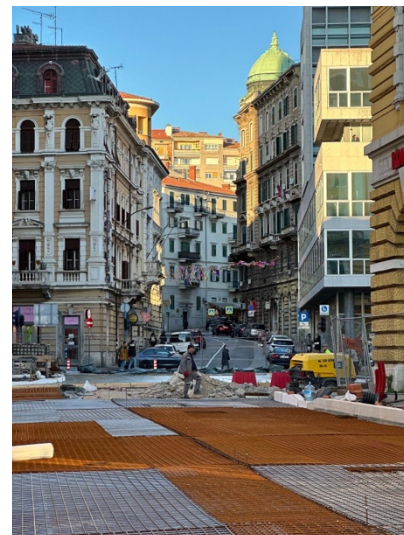
A representative illustration of such a low living standard and disregard for the residents is the current situation in Rijeka's city centre. As described by Jana Perković in her column "Good citizens of Rijeka, and the city that doesn't deserve them" (*Dobri gradani Rijeka, i grad koji ih ne zaslužuje*), construction work that is taking place in the city centre since January 2024 disables safe crossings and proper waste management, making it hard to access local shops, and even residents' own homes (see Figures 14, 15, and 16). However, she mentions, compensating for the city's failures are the citizens of Rijeka who show strong civic engagement. They consistently clean up beaches, fix local roads, and support community projects. Perković draws parallels to other European cities suggesting grassroots efforts could revitalise Rijeka.



**Figure 14.**  
*Construction work in the city centre 1.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 15.**  
*Construction work in the city centre 2.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 16.**  
*Construction work in the city centre 3.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.

In line with such a perspective on revitalisation of Rijeka is the premise of this research that proximity tourism, through heightened psychological ownership and experiences of otherness, could improve the quality of life of Rijeka's residents and the overall livelihood of the city.

## 3.2 About Urbani separate

Urbani separate is a collective based in Rijeka, Croatia, focused on revitalising urban spaces and fostering community engagement through participatory and sustainable practices. Founded in 2014, the collective aims to transform neglected public and natural areas by combining culture, education, and tactical urbanism (Urbani separate, 2024). By creating inclusive spaces and encouraging community participation, Urbani separate contributes to local development in meaningful ways—developing a network of active volunteers, collaborating with international partners, and fostering sustainable relationships between citizens and institutions. Their long-term methodologies challenge traditional urban planning by emphasising local agency, shared decision-making, and the value of cultural and green interventions in the growth of the city.

Throughout the years, Urbani separate has been active in organising local committees, fostering community participation and shared decision-making. Through these committees, residents are invited to engage in open discussions, share their concerns, and actively contribute to shaping their neighbourhoods. Next to that, the collective continuously organises projects with a goal of revitalising local neighbourhoods and bringing people together. One of their recent initiatives, *Greetings from Rijeka*, focused on reclaiming neglected urban spaces. Through various activities such as city walks, camping, lectures, film screenings, expeditions to historical sites, beach clean-ups, and public discussions, the project invited participants to rediscover and appreciate the rich urban landscape of Rijeka (see Figures 17, 18, and 19). Another significant project, *Rječina Nature Park*, highlights the collective's dedication to environmental sustainability. This initiative aimed to protect and promote the natural heritage of the Rječina River through community-driven efforts, educational activities, and sustainable land-use strategies. By involving residents and stakeholders, Urbani separate fosters a connection between the local community and the natural landscape, encouraging shared responsibility for its preservation.



**Figure 17.**  
*Urbani separate's walking tour.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.





**Figure 18.**  
*Exploring an old hospital.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 19.**  
*Social moments.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.

The projects and initiatives of Urbani separe closely align with the concept of proximity tourism activities. Residents who participate in the activities are encouraged to explore and interact with their own city in new ways, becoming resident tourists. While also living in the destination, residents adopt the perspective of a tourist, noticing aesthetic and cultural elements of their surroundings that might typically be overlooked in their daily routines. These experiences are not separate from everyday life but are instead integrated into the residents' daily experiences, creating a deeper connection with their environment.

Given Urbani separe's experience and approaches in the context of Rijeka, their work provides valuable insights for understanding how proximity tourism, psychological ownership and construction of otherness, contribute to improving the quality of life in urban areas.

The participants of Urbani separe's activities can be regarded as resident tourists - living in the destination, but also being more critical and noticing aesthetic aspects of the city more easily than during their everyday life. These touristic experiences are deeply intertwined with everyday life, blurring the boundaries between being a resident and a tourist. Given Urbani separe's extensive knowledge and experience in organising such activities, particularly in the context of Rijeka, the organisation serves as a valuable collaborator for this research. Their expertise provides critical insights into the dynamics of proximity tourism, psychological ownership, and the construction of otherness, making them an essential partner in understanding these concepts in the context of this thesis.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design, and is divided into two stages. This methodology aims, first of all, to analyse how proximity tourism is experienced by resident tourists. Second, it intends to understand the effects of proximity tourism activities on the quality of life and their role in the construction of psychological ownership and otherness. As the basis of qualitative research is an assumption that individuals play an active role in shaping social reality (Boeije, 2009), qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations and focus groups were employed to allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, emotions, and behaviours (Fossey et al., 2002). The participants of the research were residents of Rijeka who participate in proximity tourism activities organised by Urbani separe. Important to mention is that all data collection and interaction with residents was conducted in Croatian language.

### 4.2 *Stage 1*. Semi-structured interviews

To get in-depth insights into experiences of proximity tourism, this research recruited residents of Rijeka who have previously joined multiple activities of Urbani separe. A purposive sampling method was employed, with Urbani separe identifying residents from their database who were the most active participants in their activities and were most likely to be willing to share their thoughts, emotions, and opinions in interviews. This approach ensured access to participants who had attended several activities and could therefore share nuanced and detailed stories and experiences. The group of interviewees consisted of six residents with diverse backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 23 to 66 years old, providing diverse perspectives. The group was predominantly female, with five women and one man. All interviewees were professionally or actively engaged in the cultural sector, either through their work or community involvement. Their ties to Rijeka also vary; some were born in the city, while others had moved and lived there for a certain period. Despite these differences, all participants had experienced Urbani Separe's activities both as guests and as contributors to the organisation of the initiatives. This dual role offered valuable insights into their experiences and perceptions.

Over a two-week period, six semi-structured interviews were conducted. The semi-structure format allowed for flexibility while ensuring that key themes related to psychological ownership, otherness, and quality of life were thoroughly explored (Fossey et al., 2002). The [interview guide](#) and the questions were structured to facilitate a natural flow and encourage introspection and personal reflection. The guide began with introductory questions about participants' previous experiences with Urbani Separe, aimed at easing them in the interview process. As the conversation progressed, questions became more focused on proximity tourism, otherness, psychological ownership, and ultimately the influence these have on quality of life. The interviews concluded with closing questions regarding participants' overall opinion of Urbani separe and improvement points, encouraging them to consider the future of the initiative.



To ensure a comfortable interview environment, participants were given the possibility to choose the location, with interviews most often taking place in local pubs. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of participants' responses. Participants were asked for permission to record and were assured of confidentiality and secure handling of recorded data.

After verbatim transcription of all the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes related to otherness, psychological ownership, and their impact on quality of life. The interview data was analysed using both deductive codes drawn from the literature review and inductive codes that captured emerging insights from the data. Subsequently, axial and selective coding were applied to re-evaluate the codes, organising them into hierarchy. As a result, a [code tree](#) illustrating the key themes, main-codes, and sub-codes was developed, offering a strong foundation for the next stage of the research.

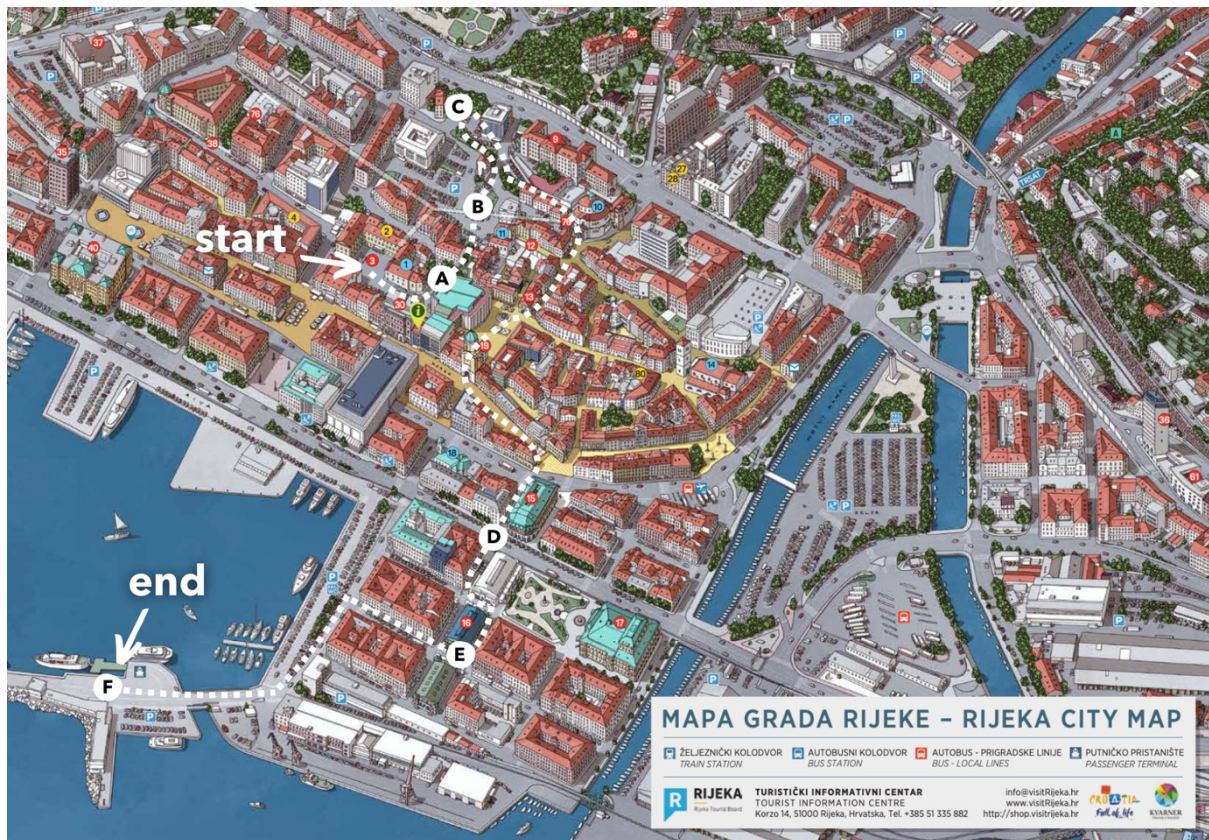
### 4.3 Stage 2. Guided city tour

The second research activity of this study involved an organised city tour designed to actively engage participants in proximity tourism, with a focus on exploring the construction of psychological ownership and otherness in real-world settings. This tour aimed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences as they interacted with both familiar and unfamiliar urban spaces. The tour was carefully designed based on key findings from the semi-structured interviews, with the goal of fostering a deeper connection with the city, encouraging participants to see both unknown and familiar spaces in new ways and consider their potential for transformation. This type of an approach enabled gathering insights through participants' lived experiences, which allowed for exploration of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions as they interact with familiar environments in novel ways.

The tour was organised in collaboration with Urbani separe, specifically for the purpose of this research. Participants were new members of Urbani separe, invited by the organisation to join the tour. The group consisted of fourteen individuals, including ten participants, three guides, and the researcher. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 50 years old, with a mix of genders and diverse backgrounds, ensuring a variety of perspectives.

The tour took place on February 18th, 2025, from 17:00 until 18:30, and was divided into two main parts (see Figure 20). The first part focused on exploring three lesser-known or neglected public spaces: Primorski Park (A), Gomila parking lot (B), and a green oasis above Gomila (C). At each location, participants were encouraged to connect with the spaces and reflect on their potential (see Figure 21 and 22). Guides provided historical or contextual information and prompted participants with questions about their feelings, observations, and ideas for improvement. This part of the tour aimed to shift participants' perspectives, encouraging them to see these spaces in new ways. The tour then continued through a "Tunnel of transformation" (D), a pedestrian underpass symbolising a shift in perspective, where participants were encouraged to adopt the mindset of tourists in their own city. In the second part of the tour (E), participants were given the opportunity to wander independently, explore, and photograph their surroundings as tourists. This segment allowed for personal exploration and discovery, further reinforcing the theme of otherness. The tour concluded

with a group discussion in a cafe (F), where participants shared their impressions and reflected on their experience. The full tour plan can be found in the [appendix](#).



**Figure 20.**

*Tour map.*

Adapted from "Rijeka City Map," by Visit Rijeka, 2022. Copyright 2022 by Visit Rijeka.

Throughout the tour, the researcher conducted participant observations to learn about the naturally occurring interactions and behaviour, and to develop a more complex understanding of the research topics (Fossey et al., 2002). Observations were guided by a structured [observation guide](#), which focused on facial expressions, body language, movement, interactions with others in the group, engagement with spaces, and comments and discussions initiated by participants. Next to field notes, voice recordings were taken to ensure proper accurate capture of participants' responses to the guides' questions. During the independent exploration segment, participants were encouraged to take photographs and observe their surroundings from a tourist's perspective. In the cafe, follow-up questions were posed to the group, such as, "Did you take a different route than usual?" and "Did you see or discover anything interesting?". This prompted a lively group discussion where participants shared their experiences and showcased the photos they had taken during the independent exploration.





**Figure 21.**  
*A hidden green oasis.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 22.**  
*Walking from location to location.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.

Following the tour, all recordings were verbatim transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted using the same code tree developed for the interview analysis. Finally, cross-data comparison was utilised to identify recurring themes, contradictions, or insights that may appear in individual interviews but not in group settings, and vice-versa. Triangulating the data collected through various methods highlighted different aspects of situations and experiences and helped to portray them in their complexity (Fossey et al., 2002).

## 5. Ethical considerations and positionality

### 5.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical matters were considered throughout the research process, ensuring that participation is fully voluntary. Therefore, in both stages of the research, participants were informed about the goals of the research and how their input will be used. Informed consent was asked from each participant to use the information they provided, and they were assured of confidentiality and secure handling of data. Special attention was given to ensuring that participants are comfortable sharing their perspectives and experiences. Reciprocity was prioritised by considering potential benefits for the local community. Finally, cultural sensitivity and emotional wellbeing were central to all interactions, ensuring that participants' lived experiences are respected.

### 5.2 Positionality

Acknowledging my own background and potential biases is crucial for the shaping of the research. Coming from Rijeka myself, I have an insider perspective and familiarity with the local culture and

spaces, which might help me understand local's perspectives. However, it can also be a disadvantage as I could unconsciously assume that my experiences and views are shared by others, potentially leading to bias in my interpretations. On the other hand, having lived in the Netherlands for the past five years, I have developed various fresh perspectives on Rijeka, which can enrich my observations, but might also cause me to see things differently from residents who have lived there continuously. In addition, being 23 years old, my age may have played a role in how I was perceived by different age groups in Rijeka. While younger participants might have connected with me more easily, older participants might have been more reluctant to share their thoughts and opinions. However, this was not evident during the interviews or the guided city tour. Lastly, being a student of Tourism, Society and Environment at WUR, I might have a more theoretical and research-oriented perspective on proximity tourism compared to the residents of Rijeka. Therefore, it was important to approach the research topic not only as a researcher, but also as a citizen of Rijeka to bridge the distance between academic concepts and local, lived experiences.

## 6. Results

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the research, which are based on data collected through semi-structured interviews and the guided city tour, both conducted in collaboration with Urbani separe. The findings are presented thematically, following the structure of the code tree developed for the interview analysis. The identified themes - place-based exploration and perception, personal transformation, and community engagement - reflect the key dimensions through which proximity tourism impacts otherness, psychological ownership, and quality of life. Each subsection delves into specific insights and patterns that emerged from the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of how proximity tourism activities organised by Urbani separe influence residents' engagement with their urban environment. The results highlight the transformative potential of proximity tourism and offer valuable implications for fostering a deeper connection between residents and their city.

### 6.1 Place-based exploration and perception

Proximity tourism activities, as facilitated by Urbani Separe, offer residents of Rijeka a unique opportunity to engage with their city in transformative ways. Through guided tours, cultural activities, and participatory workshops, participants explore both familiar and unfamiliar nearby places, uncovering hidden layers of their urban environment. This process enables them to see everyday spaces through a new lens, ultimately redefining their perception and interaction with their surroundings.

#### 6.1.1 Exploration and discovery

A key motivator for participating in proximity tourism is the *exploration of nearby places*. This exploration can take multiple forms: discovering unfamiliar locations, gaining access to usually inaccessible spaces, and uncovering new aspects of familiar places. Engaging with these spaces through touristic activities, for example with a guide who tells a narrative, adds value to the experience. On one hand, Urbani Separe's activities allow residents to discover new and lesser-known areas within the city, as one participant noted:



Urbani separe revealed dozens of locations, micro-locations in the city that I didn't know about, and through their narrative, they presented them to me in a way I wouldn't have seen if I had just been a passerby. *[Urbani Separe mi je otkrio desetke lokacija, mikro lokacija u gradu za koje nisam znala i kroz svoj narativ mi ih je predočio nekim očima koje sama ne bi imala da sam tamo bila prolaznica.]*

(Interviewee 5)

Some participants particularly valued the opportunity to visit areas that are typically inaccessible to the public. A recurring example mentioned by interviewees was Ivex, a building located near the city center and the port. Originally serving as an office building, Ivex has been repurposed into a cultural hub. Visiting Ivex and similar places sparked curiosity and a sense of exclusivity:

I think it's great, for example, with Ivex, because it's not something you can usually visit. And I know they had a few other activities or guided walks to places like that where you can't go on your own. *[Pa meni je super tipa za Ivex što nije stvar na koju možeš inače otići. I znam da su imali još par nekih aktivnosti ili nekih vođenih šetnji po takvim nekim mjestima gdje ne možeš otići sam.]*

(Interviewee 1)

...we have a prison in the city centre, I mean, what kind of a city has that, but I'd really like to see what it looks like inside. *[...mi imamo zatvor u centru grada, mislim kakav grad to ima, ali zapravo bi ful htio vidjeti kako to izgleda iznutra.]*

(Interviewee 2)

On the other hand, proximity tourism also involves visiting familiar locations and uncovering hidden aspects of everyday spaces. Such activities often draw attention to the elements of the city that are otherwise missed, giving new meanings and leading to deeper appreciation of everyday surroundings. Interviewees described how such activities drew their attention to overlooked details in the city:

It's interesting when you pass by some element in the space every day and don't even know why it's here or that it has some interesting twist. *[Zanimljivo je kad prolaziš pored nekog elementa u prostoru svakodnevno, a ne znaš ni zašto je ovdje, ni da ima neki zanimljiv tvik.]*

(Interviewee 5)

...that first walk I went on with them through Pećine, I had no idea half the beach was there...Once you go through it with someone who knows where everything is, suddenly you know your way around. *[...ta prva šetnja na kojoj sam bila s njima po Pećinama, pol plaže nisam imala blage da su tamo...Jednom prođeš to s nekim tko zna di je šta, i odjednom znaš se snaći.]*

(Interviewee 1)

This heightened attention to detail was also evident during the tour as participants frequently expressed curiosity and surprise, and commented on overlooked elements:

Until now, I hadn't noticed the money graffiti. [*Ja nisam dosad uopće skužila ovaj grafit majmuna.*]  
(Tour participant 1)

I didn't know about those two parks near the Gomila parking lot. [*Nisam znao za ona dva parka kod parkinga Gomile.*]  
(Tour participant 4)

These findings suggest that proximity tourism is not solely about discovering new places, but also about seeing familiar ones in a new light. By drawing attention to such forgotten, unconventional or overlooked public spaces, these activities foster a deeper connection between residents and their city.

Embedded in the activities of Urbani Separe is *place-based learning*, where citizens engage with and learn about their everyday surroundings through active participation. They develop a deeper understanding of Rijeka's urban, historical and cultural elements and dynamics:

I gained a better spatial perception, and it's not so much about what's happening where, but how things function, how all those cultural relationships in Rijeka are connected. [*Dobila sam bolju prostornu percepciju, a i to nekako ne di se šta radi, nego kako funkcioniraju, koliko su povezani svi ti kulturni odnosi u Rijeci.*]  
(Interviewee 1)

A key factor that draws participants to these activities is the extensive knowledge that members of Urbani Separe have about the city:

They always have a lot of knowledge about the spaces they work with, their history, and their architectural elements. [*Uvijek imaju puno znanja o prostorima koji se kreću, njegove povijesti, njegovim građevnim elementima.*]  
(Interviewee 5)

During the city tour, non-verbal behaviour such as frequent glances around the space, observations of the surroundings, and nodding in acknowledgement indicated participants' active engagement and desire to understand the deeper layers of their urban environment. This was also evident through the questions participants asked:

What's with that house, that building? [*Šta je s tom kućom, zgradom?*]  
(Tour participant 3)

Do you know what these walls are remnants of? Is it some kind of monument? [*A da li znate od čega su ovi zidovi ostatak, je li to neki spomenik?*]  
(Tour participant 6)

Beyond learning about the city, these activities foster intellectual engagement by encouraging participants to think critically and develop new thoughts and ideas about themselves and the city:

It's precisely because it develops you in some way, because you have opportunities just with your own activities, or ideas...you can do a lot. If you're not involved anywhere, you just turn on the TV at home and you're passive. One thing leads to another; you get an idea, some little thing inspires you, you think 'This could be done, or that' ... *[Pa upravo zato što te razvija na neki način, jer imaš mogućnosti samo sa svojim neakvim aktivnostima, odnosno idejama...možeš svašta. Jer ako nisi nigdje uključen, doma upališ televiziju i pasivan si. Jedno vuče drugo; dobiš ideju, neka sitnica te potakne na moglo bi se to i to...]*

(Interviewee 3)

Such constructive thinking was further exemplified during the tour, where participants actively engaged with the spaces and envisioned their potential. For instance, while standing on a small green area next to the road the group engaged in a discussion about the possibilities for transforming the space (see Figure 23). One participant critically reflected on the feasibility and quality of such interventions, asking:

Yes, but do we even see an opportunity to create a quality place here along the road, or maybe not? *[Da, ali dal ovdje ovako uz cestu uopće vidimo priliku za stvaranje nekog kvalitetnog mjesta ili možda i ne?]*

(Tour participant 6)



**Figure 23.**

*A small green area next to the road.*

Note. Photograph by the author.

A crucial aspect of this intellectual engagement in the opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas with others. Open discussions and participatory workshops provide a space where participants have the opportunity to collaboratively reflect on diverse perspectives and urban issues which gives them momentum and inspiration to take action:

We had workshops with students; they pulled data from Reddit about what bothers people in Rijeka and then categorised the positive and negative comments...you see that young people have the desire and will to work...You realise that you just need to give them a chance and open the doors to cultural work a bit. People are really eager to engage in this, and you see how the topic we worked on, problems in Rijeka, wasn't imposed at all, but rather we discussed it together and came up with random ideas. *[Imali smo radionice sa studentima, iz Reddita su izvukli što ljudima smeta u Rijeci i onda su pozitivne i negativne komentare stavljali...vidiš da mladi imaju želju i volju za rad...Skužiš da samo treba dat šansu i malo otvorit vrata tog kulturnog rada. Ljudi se ful žele baviti tim i vidiš zapravo koliko ta tema gdje smo radili probleme u Rijeci nije bila nikako nametnuta nego zajednički pričaju i nalaze neke random stvari.]*

(Interviewee 1)

And there really are a lot of highly skilled, intelligent, and valuable people who are willing to go the extra mile to make something happen. It's truly motivating to be active in such a city. *[I stvarno je puno jako kvalitetnih, inteligentnih, vrijednih ljudi koji su spremni toliko ekstra dati od sebe da se nešto napravi. I stvarno je motivirajuće djelovati u takvom gradu.]*

(Interviewee 2)

Ultimately, place-based learning is not solely about acquiring historical and factual knowledge, but about developing new ways of thinking and understanding a place. This process manifests through active engagement with both people and places.

### 6.1.2 Shifting perspectives

Participating in guided tours or cultural activities organised by Urbani Separe evokes tourist-like experiences, encouraging participants to adopt a *tourist gaze*. This shift in perspective enables residents to see their city in a new light, often making mundane or overlooked spaces feel unfamiliar and intriguing, as one participant noted:

They changed my perception of every place I have visited since then...guided tours were a great opportunity to learn something about neighbourhoods I thought were uninteresting. *[Promijenile su moju percepciju prema svakom mjestu koje sam od tad posjetila...vođene šetnje su bile sjajna prilika saznati nešto o kvartovima za koje sam mislila da su nezanimljivi.]*

(Interviewee 6)

This shift in perspective was also acknowledged by the tour participants themselves. At the end of the tour, participants reflected on how their behaviour unconsciously changed when they were asked to imagine themselves as tourists in Rijeka. One participant noted:

For me, the main difference between before, when we were just strolling, and now, when I am in the role of a tourist, I look up more. *[Meni je nekako osnovna razlika kada smo samo šetali prije i sada kada sam u ulozi turista, pogled mi se diže gore.]*

(Tour participant 8)

Additionally, guides and educational elements in local sites play a crucial role in fostering this perspective. By providing narratives and context, they enhance curiosity and engagement with the space. One interviewee reflected on a past experience visiting Hartera, a former paper factory in Rijeka that was once a leading paper producer in Europe but now consists of empty, ruined halls (see Figure 24 and 25). The interviewee explained that they had visited Hartera alone, but felt that the



experience would have been significantly enhanced if a guide had been present to provide historical or contextual information:

Let's say for Hartera, it would have been great if a worker had gone with me and shown me around, saying 'this is where this machine was', telling the whole story, so something guided and educational. [*Recimo za Harteru bi mi bilo super da je neki radnik išao sa mnom i da mi je pokazivao 'tu ti je bio ovaj stroj', ispričao cijelu priču, znači nešto vođeno i edukativno.*]

(Interviewee 2)



**Figure 24.**  
*Hartera building.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 25.**  
*Hartera halls.*  
Note. Photograph by the author.

Consciously adopting the tourist gaze enables participants to embody a *resident tourist perspective*, making them feel like a tourist in their own city. People see and learn new things about their everyday surroundings, making them feel like they are in a new city or a parallel universe, as two interviewees noted:

...like I came into a new city/neighbourhood or entered into some idyllic parallel universe. [*...kao da sam došla u novi grad/kvart ili ušla u neki idilični paralelni svemir.*]

(Interviewee 6)

...when Urbani Separe did those tours, I went on a few of them, and you find out some things about the city that really make you feel like a tourist, like it wasn't part of your life all along and was there next to something you've passed by every day...So from that perspective, it truly felt like I was sightseeing in some strange city [*...kad je Urbani Separe te ture radio, neke od tih tura sam bio pa saznaš neke stvari o gradu zbog kojih se zbilja osjećaš kao turist, kao da nije to bilo dio tebe cijeli život i tu stajalo pored nečega, prolaziš pored toga svaki dan...Tako da s te strane je bilo stvarno kao da sam na razgledavanju u nekom čudnom gradu.*]

(Interviewee 2)

This fresh perspective often evokes positive emotions, as participants find excitement in experiencing their city in a new way:

...at that point, I felt like I was wandering through the city as if I were a guest in it. But I actually liked that position. It was really exciting. [...*tad sam se osjećala da švrljam po gradu kao da sam gost u tom gradu. Ali svidjela mi se čak ta pozicija. To mi je bilo baš uzbudljivo.*]

(Interviewee 4)

Having such a dual perspective on a place results in appreciating the place and its uniqueness more, and seeing the extraordinary in the mundane. It results in viewing Rijeka as more than just a place to live, but as a city to explore and enjoy.

Furthermore, visiting inaccessible and overlooked spaces or being told a narrative about a space transforms how people perceive their surroundings, enabling the *reframing of spaces*. The organised tour encouraged participants to see familiar spaces in a new light. As they walked from location to location, participants reimagined neglected spaces, often commenting on how these areas could be repurposed for better use. On multiple occasions, spontaneous brainstorming sessions emerged, where participants would share their ideas for improving and utilising these spaces:

They could hold movie screenings here, open-air films. [*Tu se mogu kina održavati, filmovi na otvorenom.*]

(Tour participant 4)

I think for Rijeka, parkings like this one have space...if there were few stores of parking, then you get space and passage. [*Ja mislim da za Rijeku, na ovakvim parkinzima ima prostora...da je par etaža parkinga, i onda da se dobije prostor i prolaz.*]

(Tour participant 2)

With nice graffiti, this space could be really beautiful! [*S lijepim grafitima bi se ovaj prostor mogao jako dobro uljepšati!*]

(Tour participant 4)

Moreover, the events and initiatives of Urbani Separe redefine urban spaces, transforming their perceived function and purpose. Interviewees reflected on how visiting the previously mentioned Ivex building with the organisation shifted their perspective, revealing new possibilities for how the space could be used:

We were on the terrace of the Delta 5 building of Ivex this summer, which is a space I'd never before viewed as a public space for gatherings. [*Bili smo ljetos na terasi Delti 5 zgrade Ivekxa, što je neki prostor koji nikad prije nisam vidjela kao javni prostor za javna okupljanja.*]

(Interviewee 5)

...going to the Ivex rooftop this summer...when you are on the rooftop, you see things differently than when you are down below, even though I've probably passed by a hundred times by car or on foot. When you are on the rooftop, you see exactly where everything is, and then you get some vision of your city; like wow, what could be here...that change my perspective. [...*odlazak ovog ljeta isto na krov Ivekxa...kad si na krovu, drugačije vidiš nego kada si dolje, makar sam možda stoput prolazila s autom ili pješke. Kad si na krovu onda točno vidiš di je šta i onda dobiš nekakvu viziju svog grada; ajme šta bi tu bilo...to mi je promijenilo vidike.*]

(Interviewee 3)

Beyond that, spaces often associated with negative connotations or mundane routines can be reimagined as vibrant and meaningful. One interviewee noted how Plavi krug (blue circle), a specific area that was once a part of the Hotel Park complex, was transformed during a neighbourhood festival organised by Urbani separe. The former modernist hotel was once a symbol of Rijeka's tourism industry but has since fallen into decay. Today, Plavi krug symbolises both the city's architectural heritage and the potential for neglected urban spaces to be revitalised. The interviewee reflected:

Last year at the neighbourhood festival of Urbani Separe when they had a brunch at Plavi Krug...you're like, wow, this isn't a place where people hang out all night, but now something fancy is happening here...but for me, that was one of those 'this is actually really cool' moments, both the place and the things they're doing. *[Prošle godine na kvartovskom festivalu od Urbanog Separea kad su na Plavom krugu napravili marendu... budeš kao wow, ovo nije mjesto gdje se ljudi klošare cijelu noć, nego tu je sad nešto fino.....ali to mi je jedan od onih „ovo je zapravo ful fora“ momenata, i mjesto i stvari koje rade.]*

(Interviewee 1)

Through these activities, Urbani Separe redefines urban spaces, shifting their perceived function and strengthening emotional bonds between residents and their city.

## 6.2 Personal transformation

The interviews illustrated that through Urbani Separe's initiatives, participants undergo personal transformation, cultivating a stronger connection to both themselves and their urban environment. These activities offer individuals an opportunity to explore their self-identity and sense of belonging while engaging in meaningful community efforts. As participants work together, they develop deeper emotional, social, and environmental wellbeing, which fosters a lasting impact on their daily life.

### 6.2.1 Identity and belonging

To establish a deep connection with a place, individuals must feel the opportunity to express their *self-identity*. The interviews revealed that participation in Urbani Separe's activities was often motivated by the alignment of personal values with those of the initiative. Engaging with like-minded individuals and initiatives reinforced personal identity, as some participants noted:

And that's how we started collaborating with them because we had similar visions, similar ideas. *[I onda smo tako počeli surađivati s njima jer smo imali nekako slične vizije, slične ideje.]*

(Interviewee 3)

The first project I joined was the revitalisation of the exterior part of Hartera, and it was very innovative, and I love innovative things. From the beginning there was a strong emphasis on community building, which is also very important to me, and it was interesting to participate in that experiment because it was the first project of its kind in Rijeka. *[Prvi projekt koji sam se priključila je bila revitalizacija vanjskog dijela Hartere, i bio je jako inovativan, a ja volim inovativne stvari. Od početka je bio velik naglasak na stvaranje zajednice, na community building što mi je isto jako bitno i bilo mi je zanimljivo sudjelovati u tom eksperimentu jer to je bio prvi projekt takve vrste u Rijeci.]*

(Interviewee 5)

On the other hand, the tour encouraged participants to express and reinforce their personal identity through a connection to Rijeka. During the tour, participants shared their past interactions with the space, demonstrating how their self-identity is intertwined with their sense of place. One participant noted:

There were benches up there as well, I know because I used to live nearby and would go eat up there, so I know them. *[Bile su i gore klupe, znam da sam ja, prije sam živjela blizu pa sam išla jest tu gore pa ih znam.]*

(Tour participant 5)

Being able to express one's self-identity further deepened the *sense of belonging* to the place. Participants frequently described how their involvement in Urbani Separe's initiatives fostered a sense of unity and collective purpose:

But I think in those situations, there's a kind of connection where everyone is in the same place, and you think, maybe we're doing something that actually makes sense and is more connected to the community. *[Ali mislim u tim nekim situacijama ti je neka povezanost gdje su svi na istom mjestu i budeš kao, a možda radimo nešto što zapravo ima smisla i kao više sa zajednicom.]*

(Interviewee 1)

...that community strength is being created, that awareness is growing stronger. *[...stvara se ta snaga zajednice, jača ta svijest.]*

(Interviewee 4)

Moreover, the interviews demonstrated that a sense of belonging is deeply rooted in connections to the community. For instance, one interviewee expressed pride and connection upon discovering like-minded individuals through Urbani Separe's programs:

...moments when a group of young, urban people would gather, people I didn't even know existed or were active in Rijeka, like skaters or visual artists...There's a kind of, let's say pride or connection to the city in the sense that, after all, I don't know everything, this city still reveals some amazing people that this program brought to the surface. *[...momenti kad bi se skupila neka mlada, urbana ekipa za koju ja nisam uopće znala da u Rijeci postoji i da djeluje, recimo skejteri ili neki likovni umjetnici...Tu je neka vrsta, ajmo reći, ponosa ili povezanost sa gradom u smislu, ipak ne znam sve, ovaj grad još otkriva neke super ljude koje je ovaj program izvukao van na površinu.]*

(Interviewee 5)

Similarly, another participant described how witnessing others' sense of belonging reinforced their own connection to the city:



...when I saw people like me who weren't born in Rijeka, but you could see a sense of belonging on their faces, like they were finally home, and then the thought finally hit me - 'people make the city'. [...*kad sam vidjela ljude poput mene koji nisu rođeni u Rijeci, ali na licu im se vidi osjećaj pripadnosti, kao da su doma napokon i tad mi je napokon sjela ona misao - 'ljudi čine grad'.*]

(Interviewee 6)

The recurring interactions within the community were described by one interviewee as integral to fostering a sense of belonging:

...every time I meet someone...When you are active in the community, you really meet and get to know a lot of people, and they pass through your life somehow, and it's hard for me to imagine how it would look somewhere else without all those people. [...*svaki put kad sretnem nekoga...Kako djeluješ u zajednici, stvarno puno ljudi srećeš i upoznaješ i prolaze kroz tvoj život nekako i teško mi je zamisliti kako bi to negdje drugdje izgledalo da nema svih tih ljudi.*]

(Interviewee 2)

In summary, the findings highlight that self-identity and belonging are deeply intertwined. What is more, shared experiences, collaborative participation and strong community bonds are essential for the development of a sense of belonging.

## 6.2.2 Wellbeing

Participation in Urbani Separe's activities can significantly enhance an individual's wellbeing. Through the exploration of new places in their city or viewing familiar ones from a fresh perspective, participants strengthen their sense of *environmental wellbeing*. They begin to perceive their everyday surroundings as more aesthetically appealing. One interviewee highlighted how physical improvements initiated by Urbani Separe directly contributed to this sense of environmental wellbeing by creating spaces that felt more welcoming and enjoyable:

...it's always more pleasant for me to walk into a street that's colourful, has benches and flowers...you see that it's a safe and pleasant space. [...*uvijek mi je draže ući u ulicu koja je šarena, ima klupice i cvijeće...vidiš da je to neki siguran i ugodan prostor.*]

(Interviewee 5)

The effects of such activities were immediately evident during the tour, where participants frequently expressed appreciation for small, often overlooked, aesthetic qualities of spaces. As they explored various locations, their heightened awareness of the city's details became apparent through their remarks and the photographs (see Figures 26 and 27) they shared at the end of the tour:

Here, there is a really beautiful view of the Governor's Palace. [*Ovdje je jako lijepi pogled na Guvernerovu palaču.*]

(Tour participant 3)

What's cool are all these little passageways to get to the parking lot. [*Fora su ovi svi prolazići za doć na parking.*]

(Tour participant 1)

I noticed more of Rijeka's unique architecture, which I usually overlook because I'm used to it. [Više sam primjetila arhitekturu koja je specifična za Rijeku, a često je zanemarujem jer sam naviknuta.]

(Tour participant 7)



**Figure 26.**

*City's detail 1.*

Note. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 27.**

*City's detail 2.*

Note. Photograph by the author.

Additionally, these physical improvements can also carry a symbolic value, as they assign new meanings to spaces and signify social revitalisation:

I see that something is happening, plants are being planted, grass is being mowed if the city won't do it, birdhouses are being put up, all these little things that make you see that someone lives here, that there's a community of people who communicate, that they're not each in their own box at home with the TV and that's it. They're bringing back that social moment somehow. [Vidim da se nešto događa, sade se biljke, kosi se trava ako grad neće, stavljaju se kućice za ptice, sve neke sitne gluposti zbog kojih vidiš da tu netko živi, da je zajednica nekakvih ljudi koji komuniciraju, da nisu svatko u svojoj kutiji doma s televizijom i to je to. Vraćaju taj socijalni moment nekako.]

(Interviewee 2)

As portrayed in these quotes, the interventions do not have to be large-scale or extraordinary to have a meaningful impact. Small-scale improvements and minor changes, often led by the community, play a crucial role in making spaces feel more lived-in and vibrant (see Figure 28). This enhanced satisfaction with the local environment originates from a deeper appreciation for the physical and aesthetic qualities of a place, as well as the reintroduction of social interaction into urban life.



**Figure 28.**  
Artistic graffiti.  
Note. Photograph by the author.

This heightened appreciation for the physical environment naturally leads to enhanced *emotional wellbeing*. Such benefits are both immediate and long-lasting. Participants reported experiencing instant positive emotions such as solidarity, joy, excitement and optimism:

I think it makes sense and I think it changes things for the better, and the benefits are felt quickly, from having a great time together to something useful happening and then something lasting longer. There is a sense of solidarity... *[Mislim da ima smisla i mislim da mijenja na pozitivno i da se benefite osjeti i brzo, od toga da se kao super podružiš, do toga da se i nešto korisno desi i da onda nešto i dulje traje. Postoji neka solidarnost...]*

(Interviewee 4)

During the activities, I definitely felt joy, excitement, and hope that everyone, like me, would recognise that even minimal involvement can achieve a lot and change things for the better. *[Tijekom aktivnosti definitivno sam osjećala radost, uzbuđenje i nadu da će svi kao i ja prepoznati da se uključivanjem koje može biti minimalno može napraviti tko puno toga i promijeniti stvari na bolje.]*

(Interviewee 6)

Further important findings suggest that the activities have a long-term positive effect on the emotional wellbeing of individuals. One interviewee noted that participation led to contentment, fulfilment, and even increased self-confidence when their efforts resulted in visible success:

...somehow you feel...satisfaction, a kind of fullness, maybe even some self-confidence when you succeed. *[...nekako imaš osjećaj...zadovoljstvo, neka punina...možda je neko samopouzdanje kada uspije.]*

(Interviewee 3)

Another interviewee described how such activities made them feel enriched and gave them a deeper meaning and sense of belonging:

These activities are purely for the soul, you don't have to do them, but you enjoy them...they truly enrich me...make me feel more fulfilled and enriched...you realise that you are part of the story. [*...ove aktivnosti su čisto tebi za dušu i to ne moraš, ali ti se sviđa...mene to baš oplemenjuje...čini me zadovoljnijom i bogatijom...Shvaćaš da si dio te priče.*]

(Interviewee 3)

The most significant impact of Urbani Separe's activities lies in their ability to enhance *social wellbeing*. All interviewees emphasised how participation in activities fosters deeper social connections, strengthens community bonds, and improves neighbourly relationships:

I improved communication with my neighbours and became more engaged in those interpersonal relationships. [*...poboljšala sam komunikaciju sa susjedima i više sam angažirana oko tih međuljudskih odnosa.*]

(Interviewee 6)

But what's great for me is, and we all emphasised this while working through the local committee, that we actually live here and got to know each other. Nobody really knows each other here, you know, people are strangers and all that. And then I also got to know some neighbours, and that's really... [*Ali super mi je što kao, i to smo svi naglašavali dok smo, kroz taj mjesni odbor, što zapravo mi tu živimo i upoznali smo se. Tu se nitko živ ne zna, znaš, ljudi su i stranci i to. I onda sam tako isto upoznala neke susjede, i to mi je baš evo...*]

(Interviewee 4)

The social wellbeing that is being strengthened is not solely about direct communication with people and building friendships. It is rooted in doing things together, sharing the space and knowing that others care for it the same as you, as one interviewee beautifully illustrated:

The most special things was meeting all the people I usually see in the neighbourhood and greeting each other with a warmer smile. Those greetings have remained the same to this day, so what seemed like a simple gathering, designed to include everyone living in the area, ended up connecting us on a deeper level - in a traditional neighbourly way, like in the times of our grandmothers when people knew each other's names even if they didn't live right next door. [*Najposebnije je ipak bilo sresti sve ljude koje inače vidim u kvartu pa se nekako toplije sa osmjehom pozdraviti. A ti pozdravi ostali su takvi i do danas pa nas je jedno naizgled bezazleno druženje koje je smišljeno da uključi sve ljude koji žive na tom području, spojilo nekako dublje - onako starinsko susjedski kao u doba naših baka gdje su ljudi jedni drugima znali ime iako ne žive točno 'vrata do vrata'.*]

(Interviewee 6)

Furthermore, the activities encourage collaboration even after their occurrence, which results in joint efforts to enhance shared environments.

...especially with neighbours in the neighbourhood with whom we often communicate about what else we could do together to improve shared urban spaces (such as planting flowers, collecting trash, etc.). [*...naočito sa susjedima u kvartu sa kojima često komuniciramo što bi još mogli zajedno napraviti, poboljšati na zajedničkim gradskim površinama (poput sadnje cvijeća, skupljanja smeća itd.).*]

(Interviewee 6)

Ultimately, the value of these activities lies in their ability to rebuild a sense of community, rekindling the social bonds that are often lost in modern urban life.



### 6.2.3 Impact on daily life

Through altering routines and encouraging civic participation, Urbani Separe's activities have a direct impact on the daily lives of participants. By engaging in activities, citizens get to know their surroundings better, which changes how they perceive and use urban spaces. One interviewee highlighted how their relationship with a specific area (see Figure 29) transformed after participating in a project:

I walk through Hartera much more today after that project than I did before. I know the space better, I feel safer there...Today, I truly perceive it as something very close to my home, like a portal into the forest. *[Ja puno danas više šećem Harterom nakon tog projekta nego šta sam prije išla. Bolje poznajem prostor, osjećam se sigurnije u tom prostoru...Ja ga danas stvarno doživljavam kao nešto što je jako blizu moje kuće, a da je ono portal u šumu.]*

(Interviewee 5)



**Figure 29.**  
*Hartera as a portal to forest. Note.*  
Photographed by the author.

Furthermore, participation in these activities often leads to increased civic engagement, as individuals become more motivated to follow local initiatives and contribute to community projects:

The activities motivated me to follow announcements from the city of Rijeka and get involved in the local partnership program by submitting project proposals. *[Aktivnosti su me motivirale za praćenje objava grada Rijeke i uključivanje u program lokalnog partnerstva sa prijavom prijedloga projekata.]*

(Interviewee 6)

However, this increased engagement often comes with personal sacrifices, as participants dedicate their free time to community efforts. One interviewee reflected on this trade-off:

Time-wise, it definitely did [affect daily life], because these are things outside of your regular job, so you end up reducing your free time to do things for the community, even though sometimes it feels like work too... *[Vremenski je sigurno [utjecalo na svakodnevni život] jer su to neke stvari mimo svog redovnog posla što radiš, tako da si smanjuješ zapravo nekako svoje slobodno vrijeme da bi radio neke stvari za zajednicu iako ti je to možda nekad i posao...]*

(Interviewee 2)

Despite the sacrifices, the lasting impact of the activities often outweighs the temporary inconveniences. Participants frequently noted how the initiatives left a tangible mark on their surroundings, serving as a reminder of the power of collective action:

...everything they come up with is layered, and besides the direct experience, there's always something lasting as a reminder that it doesn't take much for citizens to enrich a part of the city through their actions. *[...sve što smisle je slojevito i osim direktnog doživljaja uvijek ostane nešto trajno kao podsjetnik da ne treba puno da građani svojim djelovanjem oplemene neki dio grada.]*

(Interviewee 6)

In this way, Urbani Separe's activities not only reshape daily routines, but also foster a deeper connection to the city, encouraging participants to continue engaging and improving their urban environment.

## 6.3 Community engagement

Community engagement, as promoted through Urbani Separe's initiatives, provides residents of Rijeka with a platform to actively shape their urban environment. Individuals are encouraged to take ownership of local spaces, collaborate with neighbours, and address urban challenges. While this process fosters a sense of empowerment and responsibility, it also highlights challenges that affect participant's motivation and impact grassroots efforts.

### 6.3.1 Community stewardship

An important effect of Urbani Separe's initiatives is the way they enable citizens to *experience control* over their city. Through participation in these activities, individuals become aware of their collective power and ability to influence change. As one interviewee explained, the activities highlight the strengths of individuals and the potential for collaboration with local authorities to address urban challenges:

Through the activities, I realised the power of individuals, but also the opportunities for connecting with local government, which has a more direct influence on changing some of the shortcomings. *[Kroz aktivnosti sam uvidjela snagu pojedinaca ali i mogućnosti povezivanja sa lokalnom upravom koja ima direktniji utjecaj na mijenjanje nekih manjkavih stvari.]*

(Interviewee 6)

This sense of empowerment is further reinforced through collaboration with neighbours and community members, which strengthens social ties and builds confidence to address local issues. As one interviewee noted, solving problems through direct communication with neighbours is often more effective than navigating bureaucratic processes:

It is always easier when you make an arrangement with your neighbour than when you go together to the city and write letters. [...*uvijek je lakše to kad se dogovoriš sa susjedom nego da idete vi sad skupa gradu pa pišete.*]

(Interviewee 2)

For many participants, Urbani Separe's activities provide a tangible sense of control over specific parts of the city. One interviewee described how they felt a sense of agency by creating spaces for shared experiences and community interaction:

...not over the city, but in a small, micro-location, where you don't have physical control over it, but you beautify it in some way, whether through an event, planting plants, music, a concert, a walk, or sports. You act in the space with some people and have control over that small space... [...*ne nad gradom, ali na nekom malom, mikro-lokaciji, gdje ti nemaš fizičku kontrolu nad tim nego uljepšavaš to na neki način bilo događajem, sadnjom biljaka, muzikom, koncertom, šetnjom, sportom Djeluješ u prostoru sa nekim ljudima i imaš kontrolu nad tim malim prostorom...*]

(Interviewee 2)

This feeling of control arises when citizens see their complaints, actions and suggestions are recognised by institutions or local authorities. This makes them feel empowered to shape urban changes and influence decision-making:

At the end of the project in Hartera, we decided to insist that a publicly owned space be handed over to associations for management... We organised a roundtable discussion with the mayor and department heads, where we proposed a clear plan for the area. Through this project of the Hartera local commute, I definitely felt that we were creating and proposing potential solutions for the challenges of certain urban changes. [...*Na kraju projekta u Harteri odlučili smo insistirati da se jedan prostor u gradskom vlasništvu da na upravljanje udrugama... Organizirali smo okrugli stol s gradonačelnikom i pročelnicima, gdje smo predložili jasan plan za područje. Kroz taj projekt mjesnog odbora Hartera sam imala svakako osjećaj da kreiramo, da predložimo potencijalna rješenja za probleme nekih urbanih promjena.*]

(Interviewee 5)

Through the organisation of activities that enable individuals to influence, shape or improve spaces, Urbani Separe empowers citizens and gives them a sense of agency over their city. They demonstrate that even small-scale actions can create meaningful change.

At the same time, these activities foster a sense of responsibility for the community, along with a desire to maintain, protect, or enhance the city's cultural, natural, or social elements. This results in increased engagement in *citizenship behaviour*. Interviewees frequently mentioned how participation opened their eyes, gave them hope and encouraged them to take action:

Many activities of Urbani Separe have opened the eyes and hearts of citizens who realised they have the power to change small things that make spaces more beautiful for living, but also to build better relationships with neighbours. *[Mnoge aktivnosti Urbanog separea otvorile su oči i srca građanima koji su shvatili da imaju moć mijenjati male stvari koje čine prostor ljepšim za život ali i graditi bolje odnose sa susjedima.]*

(Interviewee 6)

...empowered and full of hope that even more people will join in 'small things' and, with minimal action, drastically improve the image of neighbourhoods or the city. *[...osnaženo i puna nade da će se još više ljudi uključiti u "male stvari" te minimalnim djelovanjem drastično poboljšati sliku kvartova ili grada.]*

(Interviewee 6)

Such citizenship behaviour was also demonstrated during the tour, where participants openly expressed their criticism and a desire to enhance the cultural and historical value of Rijeka's spaces. For example, one participant shared an idea on how to utilise an unused space that was visited:

...but precisely in this context, if this is the preserved Roman wall, then maybe the cool thing would be to have a little pathway or stairs, just so you can come and take a look. There could be a plaque here and a circular path to guide you through the space. *[...ali baš u kontekstu toga, ako je to ta sačuvana Rimska zidina, onda bi možda fora bio neki puteljak ili stepenice, čisto da možeš doći pogledat. Da je tu ploča i da te kružno provede po prostoru.]*

(Tour participant 6)

Another participant critiqued the underutilisation of Rijeka's unique urban features and proposed directions for development, demonstrating proactive engagement and a sense of responsibility:

I don't understand why this situation couldn't lead to some kind of tourist product because it's really what makes Rijeka special, and I think it works well because some of the basic dimensions have remained the same, and now you can see that it's a new building, but it functions superbly, and you get that Mediterranean feel. And that's exactly what makes Rijeka not just a typical Mediterranean city. *[Ja ne razumijem zašto iz ove situacije nebi mogao nastati neki turistički produkt jer je to stvarno ono što Rijeku čini posebnom, a mislim da lijepo funkcionira jer su neki bazični gabariti ostali isti sada i kužiš da je to nova zgrada, al super funkcionira i dobiš taj mediteranski osjećaj. I baš to čini Rijeku ne samo klasičnim mediteranskim gradom.]*

(Tour participant 9)

Furthermore, Urbani Separe's actions also inspire broader engagement, motivating others to initiate or support similar projects in their neighbourhood, creating a domino effect. One interviewee noted how Urbani Separe serves as a good example and motivator, as some local councils and communities started being more active as a result:



I have a feeling that after them, local committees and communities have become a bit more active. And that's where the foundation of change lies - in changing things through local actions. I think they are a good motivator for showing that something can be done. *[Imam osjećaj da su se nakon njih aktivirali malo ti mjesni odbori i lokalne sredine. I tu leži temelj promjene - da se nekim lokalnim akcijama promjene stvari. I mislim da su oni dobar motivator za to da pokažu da se može nešto napraviti.]*

(Interviewee 2)

The activities bring people closer together, creating a community that then plays a larger, more active role. Forming a critical mass within the community strengthens social responsibility and readiness for collective action, as noted by one interviewee:

...now there is already a critical mass that, if something gets torn down, will either react when it happens or will send five emails. *[...sad već postoji jedna kritična masa koja, ako sad se tu nešto počupa, će ili reagirati kad se to događa ili će napisati pet maila.]*

(Interviewee 4)

In summary, Urbani Separe's initiatives not only imprint a sense of responsibility to citizens and activate local engagement, but also build sustainable networks or proactive individuals who contribute to long-term community development.

### 6.3.2 Barriers in community participation

There is a widespread perception of *citizen passivity* in Rijeka, where individuals often tolerate unfavourable conditions rather than taking initiative to address them. This tolerance results in a lack of proactive engagement among residents, which disheartens those who actively participate in Urbani Separe's activities. For example, one interviewee expressed frustration with community's indifference to persistent issues:

...the gate was always awfully urinated-upon...people just tolerated it, they never locked the doors...it was like a urinal for the crowd. *[...uvijek je bio užasno popišan portun...ljudi su ti to samo tolerirali, nikad nisu zaključali vrata...to je bila kao pišalište za ekipu.]*

(Interviewee 4)

Another interviewee highlighted the general laziness and inertia of citizens, despite the availability of time to contribute to community activities:

...you always have time to spare a few hours for an activity. But people are very lazy, inert...overly complacent. *[...Uvijek imaš vremena izdvojiti par sati za neku aktivnost. Ali ljudi su jako lijeni, inertni...prekomotni.]*

(Interviewee 3)

This passivity is further aggravated by a lack of shared responsibility among citizens, making it difficult to achieve long-term change. One interviewee noted how Urbani Separe's absence from organising activities often leads to complete inaction, illustrating the community's dependency:

People quickly forget that if they [Urbani separe] don't organise activities, no one does...if there's no one else to take over their work, it remains short-term; when there's a festival, everything is great, but when there's no festival, people wait for them to come and organise one, but that's not their goal. [*Ljudi brzo zaborave da ako oni [Urbani separe] ne rade aktivnosti onda niko ne radi aktivnosti...ako nema nitko drugi za preuzeti taj njihov posao, ostane kratkoročno; kad je festival je sve super, kad nema festivala onda ljudi čekaju da oni dođu i naprave festival, ali to im nije cilj.*]

(Interviewee 1)

The lack of close relationships among residents further reduces their willingness to intervene in community issues, which inadvertently benefits those who contribute to urban decay. One interviewee explained:

The advantage of those who cause disorder is that people in the city don't know each other. That's their strength because there's no unity...if they're not damaging my door specifically, I won't say anything. But if they were damaging the door of my close neighbour, I would react...When people are closer, it definitely has an effect. [*Adut tih ljudi koji rade nered je što se ljudi u gradu ne poznaju. To je njihova snaga jer nema jedinstva...ako sad on ne oštećuje baš moja vrata, ja mu neću ništa reći. A da mi oštećuje vrata od mog bliskog susjeda, ja bi reagirala...To je zapravo kada su ljudi bliži, itekako to ima efekt.*]

(Interviewee 4)

Such passivity is often reinforced by skepticism towards new activities and a tendency to tolerate unfavourable conditions rather than seeking change.

Another hurdle mentioned by interviewees are *organisational challenges* that Urbani Separe often faces. Scheduling issues are a common problem as the organisation's target group is diverse, consisting of individuals of different ages and lifestyles. This makes it difficult to find a time that suits everyone.

The problem is in what timeframes they can even hold their activities, and where they are accessible to people who work normal shifts. [*...to je problem toga u kojim terminima oni mogu održavati uopće svoje aktivnosti, a gdje su pristupačni ljudima koji rade normalne smjene.*]

(Interviewee 1)

Additionally, poor communication, a lack of transparent promotion, and the lack of a centralised system for accessing information often limit citizens' engagement.

I found out about everything by accident, someone gave me the right information, but it's not like I could just go searching online, I wouldn't find anything. [*Ja sam za sve saznala kao slučajno, netko mi je dao pravu informaciju, ali nije da sad ja mogu tako ići tražiti po internetu, ne bi našla ništa.*]

(Interviewee 4)

I function exclusively through Facebook because that's the only way. Otherwise, you literally have to follow 100-200 organisations. [*Ja funkcioniram isključivo preko Facebooka jer je to jedini način. To ili moraš pratiti doslovno 100-200 udruga.*]

(Interviewee 1)

Lastly, almost all interviewees expressed *dissatisfaction with institutions* in Rijeka. One major issue is the temporary nature of many interventions, while communities seek long-lasting solutions. Without institutional involvement, many initiatives remain short-lived and fail to create a lasting impact. Interviewees noted a lack of vision and the absence of institutional support:

I feel that there is a lack of vision about what wants to be achieved, what is important for this city, instead it is just about whatever comes up in management. [...*imam osjećaj da nedostaje neke vizije što se želi postići, što je bitno u ovom gradu, nego ide se šta dođe u upravljanje.*]

(Interviewee 2)

...but it shouldn't be just a temporary installation to show that it's possible, it should be made permanent. But for that, it can't just be on the organisations, there needs to be support. [...*ali da nije samo ono privremena instalacija da se pokaže da može biti, da treba napraviti na stalno, nego da se neke stvari naprave da traju. Ali za to ne može se samo na te organizacije, tu mora biti potpora.*]

(Interviewee 2)

Moreover, administrative barriers also directly impact the ability to execute projects, further frustrating the citizens and slowing down project implementations.

We have problems with the city. The city, documentation, permits...it just overwhelms you. [*imamo problema sa gradom. Grad, dokumentacija, dozvole...jednostavno poklopi te.*]

(Interviewee 3)

The key concern is that the lack of institutional support discourages individuals and grassroots initiative from taking action, highlighting a critical gap in collaboration between organisations and formal structures.

...if only we were supported by some institution, something concrete, a base, but instead they tell us 'don't stir things up'. [...*kad bi nas podupirala neka evo, recimo, kao neka institucija, nešto konkretno, baza, a oni nas u stvari ono „ne talasaj“.*]

(Interviewee 3)

Ultimately, the lack of institutional support and long-term vision undermines the sustainability of community-led initiatives, leaving grassroots efforts to operate without the necessary backing to achieve their full potential.

## 7. Discussion

The discussion chapter synthesises the findings of this study, placing them within the broader academic discussion on proximity tourism, otherness, psychological ownership, and quality of life. Additionally, the chapter reflects on the limitations of the study and the methodological choices, offering insights for future research and practical applications.

## 7.1 Theoretical implications

### 7.1.1 Otherness

The construction of otherness is a central aspect of proximity tourism, as it encourages participants to adopt a tourist gaze and reshape their familiar environments through fresh perspectives (Zhang et al., 2024). Jeuring & Haartsen (2017) criticised how places near home are often seen as too familiar and mundane to be as exciting as faraway destinations. Furthermore, Jeuring & Diaz-Soria (2017) emphasised that when it is recognized that exoticism is not tied to geographical distance, it becomes possible to experience a sense of unfamiliarity in environments that are close to what we consider home. The findings of this study support their claims, demonstrating how the activities of Urbani separe enable residents to discover new and lesser-known areas within the city. It was found that by exploring nearby places - discovering unfamiliar locations and uncovering new aspects of familiar places - participants draw attention to the elements of the city that are usually missed, reshaping the meaning of everyday surroundings.

The findings also reveal that participation in proximity tourism activities alters participants' perception of the places they visit. Many interviewees noted a shift in their behaviour, such as looking upwards or paying attention to details they would typically ignore during their daily routines. This change in perception aligns with the concept of the tourist gaze, which Diaz-Soria (2017) describes as a conscious effort to take in new information and integrate it with existing knowledge. While the tourist gaze is often associated with negative connotations, this study highlights its positive role in proximity tourism. While Salmela et al. (2021) noted that tourist gaze is a conscious construction of otherness, the research revealed that this process can be both conscious and unconscious. Some participants in the research engaged in proximity tourism activities with the goal of discovering new aspects of their city, while others only became aware of these new perspectives upon reflection. Moreover, Diaz-Soria (2017) emphasised the role of guided walking tours, framing them as marginal experiences that unveil unfamiliar and unexpected aspects of the city. Research found this a crucial aspect of otherness construction, as through narratives, guides and educational material can reframe the space, sparking curiosity and fostering a deeper engagement with the environment.

### 7.1.2 Psychological ownership

The second theory explored in this research is psychological ownership and its relationship with proximity tourism. Pierce et al. (2003) define psychological ownership as "the state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is "theirs"" (p.86). In this study, the target of ownership is the city of Rijeka. According to Pierce et al. (2003), psychological ownership arises as a response to three fundamental human needs; efficacy, self-identity, and belongingness. These needs were consistently reflected in the experiences of participants who engaged in proximity tourism activities, highlighting how such activities foster a deeper sense of connection and responsibility toward their urban environment. First, efficacy reflects the human need for control, and through ownership, individuals experience a sense of power and personal agency (Pierce et al., 2003). The research findings show that many participants gain a tangible sense of control over parts of the city. This feeling of control is particularly evident when their concerns and suggestions are acknowledged by local institutions or authorities. Moreover, collaboration with



neighbours not only strengthens social ties but also builds confidence in addressing local issues. This sense of empowerment makes individuals and communities aware of their power, fulfilling the need for efficacy. Second, psychological ownership is closely tied to self-identity, as having a sense of ownership over a place can act as a symbolic representation of the self, reflecting an individual's core values and identity (Dawkins et al., 2017). In proximity tourism, participation is driven by the opportunity to align with personal values and connect with like-minded individuals. Through experiences and memories, participants express and reinforce their personal identity, creating a deeper emotional connection to the city. Third, according to Dawkins et al. (2017), possessions in which individuals make a considerable emotional investment and in which they find a strong sense of identification come to be regarded as a home that provides comfort, pleasure and security. The research found that the sense of belonging which emerges through proximity tourism is deeply rooted in connections to the community. When discussing their relationship with the city, participants often emphasised the influence of social interactions in shaping their attachment. The research concludes that regular engagement with the community, shared experiences, and collaborative participation play a vital role in strengthening the sense of belonging.

Pierce et al. (2003) further theorise that psychological ownership emerges through three major routes; coming to intimately know the target, investing the self in the target, and controlling the ownership target. These routes were evident in the experiences of participants of this study. Through active participation in proximity tourism activities, individuals develop a deeper understanding of historical and cultural dynamics of their city. This process of place-based learning not only enhances their knowledge but also fosters intellectual engagement by encouraging critical thinking and self-reflection. A key aspect of this engagement is the opportunity to exchange ideas with others. Open discussions and participatory workshops create spaces for collaborative reflection on diverse perspectives and urban issues, inspiring individuals to take action. While coming to know the place is at the core of proximity tourism, investing the self and controlling the place are also reinforced through the activities. Investing the self into the target involves personal contributions of time, energy, and creativity. Pierce et al. (2003) note that people are likely to feel they own that which they create, shape, or produce. In some cases, research participants revitalised spaces through collaborative projects like planting flowers and organising festivals. These activities required a personal investment, reinforcing their sense of ownership over the space they helped shape. Additionally, participatory workshops provided opportunities for individuals to share their ideas and collaborate with others to design new spaces. Pierce et al. (2003) further note that the more control a person has over certain objects, the more these objects are psychologically perceived as an extension of the self. As mentioned before, participation in proximity tourism activities gives individuals control and ability to influence change. In this study, participants' involvement in decision-making, such as roundtable discussions and proposing plans, gave them agency over urban changes.

An essential aspect to why psychological ownership deserves academic attention is its positive association with citizenship behaviour. When an individual's identity is tied to a target, it fosters a stronger sense of responsibility, motivating them to act as stewards who prioritise the community's interests over their personal gain (Pierce et al., 2003). This relationship is supported by Zhang & Xu (2019), who found that residents with a strong emotional and functional attachment to a place are more inclined to engage in positive behaviours that benefit the location. In this study, interviewees

often highlighted how participation in local initiatives not only broadened their perspective but also gave them a sense of hope and urgency, encouraging them to take action. Moreover, the efforts of organisations like Urbani separe inspire wider community engagement, motivating individuals and communities to initiate or support similar projects. This domino effect demonstrates how psychological ownership can lead to collective action, ultimately contributing to the city's overall wellbeing.

Previous research on psychological ownership has mostly focused on organisational contexts, investigating how it impacts employers behaviour, work ethic, and job satisfaction (Avey et al., 2012; Olckers et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2001; Seckin et al., 2018; van Dyne & Pierce., 2004). Some scholars have also explored its relation to tourism (Deng et al., 2021; Kumar & Nayak., 2019; Sau-Ching Yim., 2021; Zhang & Xu., 2019), but these studies primarily focused on tourists themselves or on how heightened psychological ownership in locals can lead to better destination marketing and branding. Therefore, the results of this research provide novel insights into how proximity tourism creates a sense of psychological ownership in individuals. The study extends psychological ownership theory to urban community contexts, highlighting its role in fostering collective responsibility and social cohesion. By demonstrating how proximity tourism fosters psychological ownership, this research underscores its potential as a regenerative form of tourism that strengthens community ties and promotes local stewardship.

### 7.1.3 Quality of life

The main purpose of this research was to explore how proximity tourism, through otherness and psychological ownership, positively affects the quality of life of an individual. Previous research established that psychological ownership is positively associated with citizenship behaviour and a greater willingness to make personal sacrifices (Pierce et al., 2003). Similarly, experiencing otherness has been shown to satisfy higher psychological needs such as self-actualisation, self-esteem, and connection (Diaz-Soria, 2017). These effects were evident in this study, as participants who partook in proximity tourism activities actively engaged with spaces, thought critically as they envisioned their potential, and developed new thoughts and ideas about the city and themselves. Additionally, Salmela et al. (2021) highlight that adopting a tourist gaze changes the residents' perception of the mundane, allowing them to perceive their neighbourhood in a more visually appealing light. This shift in perspective was also observed in this research, as participants began to appreciate the visual and cultural qualities of their surroundings, recognizing that their city is as aesthetically appealing as any other touristic destination, and ultimately fostering a deeper connection to their city.

Notably, this research uncovered additional positive effects of proximity tourism that extend beyond the findings of previous studies. The results reveal that proximity tourism offers both instant and long-term impacts on quality of life. During the tours, participants experienced immediate positive effects, such as the joy of exploring nearby places, engaging in place-based learning, and reframing spaces through a new lens. The act of seeing their city through a tourist gaze sparked curiosity and excitement, creating an instant sense of enrichment and cognitive stimulation. The excitement and optimism were not only enjoyable in the moment, but also contributed to long-term emotional wellbeing, as participants reported feelings of contentment, fulfilment, and even increased self-confidence. In addition to emotional wellbeing, proximity tourism also has a significant impact on

social wellbeing. All participants emphasised these activities deepened their social connections, strengthened community bonds, and improved their relationships with neighbours. This extends beyond direct communication and friendship - it is cultivated through shared experiences, collective action, and the mutual care for communal spaces. For example, participants noted that working together on community projects, such as planting flowers or organising festivals, not only enhanced their sense of belonging but also fostered a collective spirit of care and stewardship. Therefore, the study revealed that some impacts of proximity tourism are more long-term in nature. Involvement in the activities fosters a sense of belonging, strengthens emotional and social wellbeing, and encourages citizenship behaviour. This distinction between immediate and long-term impacts provides a more nuanced understanding of how proximity tourism influences quality of life.

These findings open up new directions for research on the relationship between proximity tourism and quality of life. Future studies could explore how different types of activities, such as city tours, environmental discussions or workshops, influence emotional and social wellbeing of participants. As research on proximity tourism is still relatively scarce and not all its dimensions have been explored, this type of study would provide a stronger theoretical foundation and a more comprehensive understanding of the positive effects of proximity tourism. Additionally, the results of such research would also have practical implications. If specific activities are found to have a strong influence on emotional and social wellbeing, organisations like Urbani separe could prioritise implementing more of those activities, thereby maximising their positive impact on the community.

#### 7.1.4 Barriers to community participation

The research identified some barriers to community participation that can limit the positive impacts of proximity tourism. For example, some participants mentioned a lack of awareness about proximity tourism activities or difficulties in accessing information about local initiatives. Others mentioned administrative barriers that hinder the ability to execute projects, resulting in the temporary nature of many interventions. Furthermore, many participants expressed frustration with the passivity of citizens and a lack of shared responsibility, which often leads to complete inaction. This results in scepticism toward new activities and tolerance of unfavourable conditions rather than seeking change. These barriers suggest that while proximity tourism has the potential to enhance the quality of life, its success depends on addressing both the mentality of citizens and the practical challenges that prevent individuals from engaging with their community. To realise the benefits of proximity tourism, efforts must focus on fostering a culture of active citizenship while simultaneously removing structural and informational obstacles to participation.

### 7.2 Limitations of the research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of proximity tourism to improve the quality of life of individuals, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. By critically reflecting on the constraints of the research, this section aims to provide a transparent assessment of the research's scope.

A significant limitation of this study is its small sample size. Six residents were recruited for the interviews, and ten residents participated in the guided city tour. While this sample size was

appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study - understanding participant's experiences, emotions, and opinions, it may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives in Rijeka. Additionally, as a thesis project, the research was constrained by time and resource limitations, which influenced the scale of data collection. Although the small sample size allowed for in-depth insights, it restricts the ability to generalise the findings to broader populations. Therefore, future research should aim to expand the sample size by recruiting more participants for interviews and organising multiple tour groups, which would help validate the findings.

Another critical limitation is selection bias. Purposive sampling method was used to recruit both the interviewees and participants of the guided city tour. For the semi-structured interviews, Urbani separe provided a list of residents of Rijeka who had previously participated in multiple activities of the organisation, worked in the cultural sector, or were involved in projects aimed at improving the livelihood of Rijeka's communities. As a result, these individuals were likely more positively inclined toward proximity tourism initiatives, such as those explored in this study. This pre-existing interest may have led to more enthusiastic or optimistic responses during interviews compared to those that might be obtained from a more general population. Similarly, the guided city tour was officially organised by Urbani separe, which invited newer members of the organisation to participate. While these participants were less involved with the organisation and had somewhat less experience with its initiatives compared to the interviewees, they still shared similar values and perspectives as Urbani separe. Therefore, they again represent only one segment of the broader population of Rijeka. While the second phase of the research mitigated some of the selection bias, future research should aim to include a more diverse and representative sample of the general population. This would provide a more balanced understanding of how different groups perceive and engage with proximity tourism.

The context-specific nature of the study is another limitation as the research is deeply rooted in the unique characteristic of Rijeka, including its urban spaces, cultural characteristics, as well as the activities of Urbani separe. While this is not a critical limitation - given that the research is presented as a case study, allowing for a detailed exploration of proximity tourism within a specific setting - it does reduce the external validity of the findings. As a result, the insights gained may not hold true in different contexts.

Finally, as with any research involving participant observation, observer bias may have influenced the finding of the guided city tour. The presence of the researcher during the tour could have affected participants' behaviour, potentially leading to socially desirable actions and responses. Additionally, the interpretation of facial expressions, body language, movement, engagement with the group and the space, is inherently subjective and may have been influenced by the researcher's perspective. In an attempt to mitigate this bias, methods such as asking open-ended questions, using a structured observation guide, and voice recordings, were utilised to ensure accurate documentation of participants' responses. However, it is important to acknowledge that some level of observer bias is inherent in participatory research.

## 7.3 Methodological reflection

Semi-structured interviews and the organised guided city tour are valuable qualitative research methods that provided deep insights into the participants' perspectives, experiences, opinions and behaviour. This section reflects on a few specific aspects of the methodology that are particularly noteworthy.

Firstly, the combination of semi-structured interviews and the guided city tour provided rich, multi-layered data, capturing both immediate experiences and long-term impacts of proximity tourism. The tour highlighted the instant benefits of proximity tourism, while the interviews captured reflective insights signifying the delayed effects of the activities. This dual approach allowed for a more holistic understanding of the dynamics at play. The combination of these methods ensured a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences. In the future, it is crucial that research employ a mix of methodologies that capture both immediate and long-term effects, as such an approach provides a more nuanced understanding of proximity tourism.

Secondly, conducting a thematic analysis provided a structured way of organising and interpreting qualitative data. Rather than relying solely on the original framework of otherness, psychological ownership and quality of life, the main themes of the code tree were developed based on the findings from the interviews. This approach allowed the data to guide the analysis, ensuring that the codes and themes were rooted in the participants' actual experiences and perspectives. By structuring the topics and codes based on meaning and value, the analysis left room for new insights that were not mentioned in previous research. This approach revealed the interconnectedness of the concepts, highlighting how otherness, psychological ownership, and quality of life overlap and influence each other in dynamic ways.

## 8. Conclusion

The research presented in this thesis aimed to explore how proximity tourism impacts residents' quality of life by enhancing a sense of otherness and psychological ownership. Through a case study of Urbani separe's initiatives, the research has demonstrated how proximity tourism activities can foster a deeper connection between individuals and their urban environment.

The findings reveal that proximity tourism is not only about exploring new spaces, but about reshaping how residents perceive and interact with their surroundings. By adopting a tourist gaze, participants see their city in a new light, uncovering hidden layers of their urban environment. This process of otherness - experiencing the familiar as unfamiliar - serves as a catalyst for personal transformation, encouraging residents to engage more deeply with their surroundings and develop a stronger sense of psychological ownership over the city. The activities offer residents the opportunity to engage with like-minded individuals and reinforce their personal identity, which further deepens their sense of belonging. A significant insight is that this sense of belonging is deeply rooted in community connections, where shared experiences, collaborative participation, and strong bonds foster a profound sense of attachment and unity. In addition to deepening participants' understanding of the city, the activities also stimulate intellectual engagement by encouraging



critical thinking, fostering new ideas, and creating opportunities for collaborative reflection and discussion. Furthermore, residents experience a sense of control over some areas, fostering a sense of responsibility for the community and the city. This results in citizenship behaviour, encouraging residents to initiate or support similar community projects in their neighbourhoods. Ultimately, the study found that participation in proximity tourism activities positively affects participants' environmental, emotional and social wellbeing. It transforms everyday spaces into aesthetically appealing and vibrant environments, leading to feelings of contentment and fulfilment. The most significant impact lies in its ability to foster deeper social connections and improve neighbourly relationships, revitalising a sense of community that is often lost in modern urban life.

The findings of this study also demonstrate that concepts of otherness and psychological ownership are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Adopting a tourist gaze fosters psychological ownership, as participants see their environment in a new light, which helps develop a deeper emotional connection to the city. For example, participants who explored new or lesser-known areas of the city through guided tours developed a stronger sense of attachment and responsibility toward those spaces. However, psychological ownership can also reinforce otherness by motivating individuals to explore and engage with their environment more deeply, creating a dynamic interplay. When it comes to quality of life, psychological ownership enhances it by fulfilling fundamental human needs, such as efficacy, self-identity, and belongingness. However, quality of life is also influenced by other factors, such as the immediate positive emotions which are more directly tied to the experience of otherness. This integrated perspective suggests that the concepts cannot be dissected; they operate alongside each other. Therefore, proximity tourism does positively influence quality of life, but it would be difficult to isolate which aspects of quality of life are improved through psychological ownership and which through otherness.

To further explore the notions of otherness and psychological ownership in relation to proximity tourism, subsequent studies should focus on investigating how various activities, such as city tours, environmental discussions, or panel debates, influence the wellbeing of participants. This would help identify which activities have the strongest positive impacts on quality of life. Moreover, as the study revealed both immediate and long-term impacts of proximity tourism, longitudinal studies could further explore how sustained engagement in proximity tourism activities affects emotional and social wellbeing, and citizenship behaviour. Ultimately, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of how proximity tourism affects diverse groups. Therefore, upcoming studies could explore how different demographic groups experience and benefit from proximity tourism. By addressing these areas, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of proximity tourism's potential to enhance quality of life and foster strong community connections.

In essence, this research highlights the transformative potential of proximity tourism as a pathway to rediscovering home, fostering community engagement, and enhancing quality of life. It also presents proximity tourism as a regenerative and deeply meaningful form of tourism - one that not only enriches the lives of residents but also redefines how we engage with and value the places we call home.

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## Appendix

### 1. Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools

To maintain transparency in my work, I wish to state that in the preparation of this document, I have utilised artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist with improving the grammar and overall readability of the text. The AI tools were used only for editing and fine-tuning purposes, and all content, ideas, and arguments remain my own.

### 2. Interview guide

#### Welcome

- Greet the interviewee and introduce myself
- Briefly explain my thesis project, and the purpose of the interview
- Outline the structure of the interview and overall duration (45/60 min)

#### Confidentiality and anonymity

- Explain how data will be used for the report (anonymity)
- Ask for permission to record the interview

#### Introduction interviewee

- Ask the interviewee to provide a brief overview of their background, current occupation, and relation to Rijeka (How old are you? What is your occupation? How long have you lived in Rijeka? Were you born here? In which neighborhood/s have you lived?)



## General questions

1. How did you first hear about Urbani Separe?
2. In which of their activities did you participate?
  - Tours, workshops, walks, discussions
3. What motivated you to participate in those activities? / Why did you decide to join?
  - Motivation, purpose, reasons
4. Can you describe an activity or event organized by Urbani separe that stood out to you the most?
  - a. Why was it so memorable? / What made it so special to you?

## Proximity tourism

5. How does participating in these activities impact your perception of Rijeka?
  - Rijeka as a place to explore and enjoy, not only a place to live
  - Changes in opinions: nicer to live in, more/less beautiful, vibrant, interesting...
6. Did the activity change how you feel about living here? If so, how?

## Otherness

7. How did you feel when participating in Urbani separe's activities/events?
  - Emotions, awareness, discovery, insider/outsider
8. Were there any moments during the activities that made you feel like a tourist in your own city?
  - a. Can you give an example? / Why didn't you feel that way?
  - b. Why do you think that made you feel like a tourist in your own city?
  - c. How did it change the way you perceive your surroundings/the city?
  - d. How do you think seeing Rijeka from a tourist's perspective influences your relationship with the city?
9. Can you recall a specific moment when something familiar in Rijeka felt surprisingly new or different during the Urbani separe event?
  - a. What made it feel unfamiliar?
  - b. How would you describe that experience of seeing familiar places/things in a new light?
  - c. How did you feel when you noticed this "newness" in a place that you already know?
  - d. Did this change in perception impact your emotional connection to the place/thing? How?
  - e. What are some elements of Rijeka (neighborhoods, landmarks, traditions) that now feel different or more valuable after seeing them through a new lens?

## Psychological ownership

10. Can you give an example of a time when you felt a strong connection to Rijeka during one of the activities you joined?
  - a. What specifically made you feel more connected?
  - b. In what way/why did those moments make you feel that you belong in Rijeka?
  - c. Would you say that Rijeka is "your" city, your home? Why?
11. Did the activities that you joined make you feel more connected to other residents?
  - a. In what way / How?
  - b. Do you feel like a part of Rijeka's community because of that?
    - Community, togetherness
12. Do you feel that you contribute something unique to the activities?
  - a. How has participating in Urbani separe's activities influenced this?
    - Values, beliefs, lifestyle, mentality, self-identity in relation to Rijeka
13. Do you feel that Rijeka represents you as a person? If so, how?
  - Through your knowledge/personality/ideas...

14. **Have the activities given you any sense of control or influence over certain places in Rijeka?**
  - a. In what way?
  - b. How did/does that make you feel?
    - Control, decision-making, social solidarity, perception and usage of places
15. **In what ways do you feel more compelled to “look after” the city after your participation in the activities?**
  - a. Can you name some specific places or elements of Rijeka that you feel more compelled to “look after”?
  - b. Why specifically those places/elements?
    - Culture, nature, people, reputation, stewardship, desire to protect
16. **Have the activities motivated you in any way for something else?**
  - To join other events, community activities, hobbies, exploring Rijeka, preservation actions

#### Quality of life

17. **In what ways would you say did participating in Urbani separe’s activities impact your quality of life?**
  - a. Has participating in these activities contributed to feelings of fulfillment? How so?
  - b. Has participating in these activities contributed to your personal growth? How so?
18. **How do these experiences that you’ve had fit into your daily life in Rijeka?**
  - a. Have they changed something?
    - Everyday routines, interactions, thoughts about Rijeka; revisiting locations, more protective of Rijeka, met people
19. **Do these experiences make you feel more content with living in Rijeka?**
  - a. In what way? Why?
20. **Generally, how do you think such local activities impact resident’s quality of life?**

#### Closing questions

21. **Do you think more initiatives like Urbani separe would benefit Rijeka’s community? Why or why not?**
22. **Are there any aspects of Urbani separe’s activities that you think could be improved to enhance the experience for residents?**

#### Demographic questions

23. **What is your age?**
24. **What is your occupation?**
25. **How long have you been living in Rijeka? Were you born here?**
26. **In which neighbourhood do you live?**

## 3. Code tree

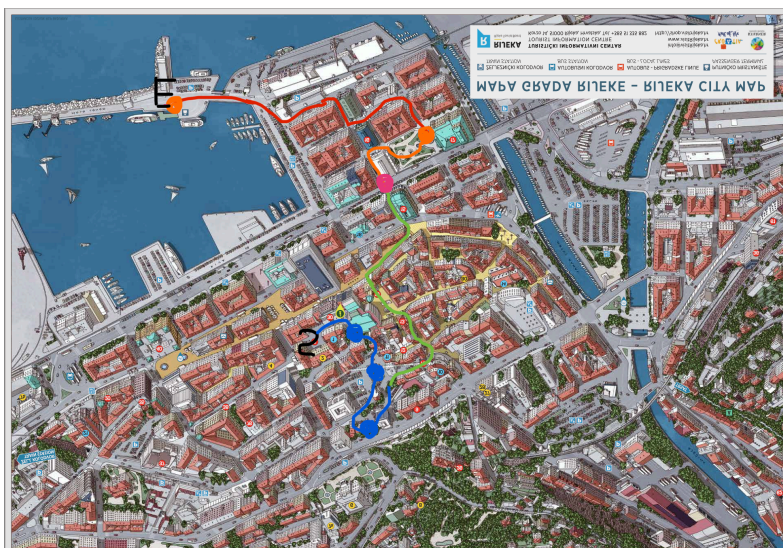
1. Place-based exploration and perception
  - a. **Exploration and discovery**
    - i. Exploration of nearby places
    - ii. Place-based learning
  - b. **Shifting perspectives**

- i. Resident tourist perspective
  - ii. Reframing spaces
  - iii. Tourist's gaze
- 2. Personal transformation
  - a. **Identity and belonging**
    - i. Self-identity
    - ii. Sense of belonging
  - b. **Wellbeing**
    - i. Environmental wellbeing
    - ii. Emotional wellbeing
    - iii. Social wellbeing
  - c. **Impact on daily life**
- 3. Community engagement
  - a. **Community stewardship**
    - i. Citizenship behaviour
    - ii. Experiencing control
  - b. **Barriers to participation**
    - i. Passivity of citizens
    - ii. Organisational challenges
    - iii. Dissatisfaction with institutions

## 4. Tour plan: Tourist in your own city

### Overall description

- Reflective walk through the city centre
- Walking from location to location where we stop and do an activity
- Purpose: Validate and expand interview findings. Witness firsthand how Urbani separe's activities foster residents' sense of psychological ownership and otherness. Generate participatory data -> capture real time reactions and ideas, enriching interview data



## PART 1: HIDDEN LAYERS - OLD TOWN

- We explore three key locations: Primorski Park, the green area in Gomila, and the green oasis above Gomila. These spaces are "unknown" to the participants—often overlooked, inaccessible, or forgotten public spaces.
- Purpose: Seeing mundane locations through a new lens, thinking of new ideas and connecting with the place
- The guide tells a short story about the place (history/meaning/current use...) -> storytelling
- Before, after, or during the "story," the guide asks participants 1, 2, or 3 of the following questions (the questions do not have to be asked exactly as written; they can be adapted to the context of the story/conversation):
  1. How does being in this space make you feel?
  2. If this was your neighbourhood, how would you use this space?
  3. What are some problems with this space that you notice?
  4. If it were up to you, and you had unlimited funds and resources, how would you transform this space?
  5. What's one thing you would add or remove here to make it more inviting or useful to the community?
  6. What's one detail about this place that you've never noticed before, and how does it change your perspective?
  7. What makes this space feel exotic or unusual?
  8. What's one thing about this space that you find unexpectedly beautiful or interesting?
  9. Does this space change your perspective on this part of the city

## WALKING

- We walk from the old town to the coast. The guide tells a few stories/information about the spaces/buildings/elements we pass.

## TRANSFORMATION TUNNEL:

To get to the coast, we will pass through an underground tunnel which will serve as a portal to a 'parallel universe' in which we are foreign tourists in Rijeka. In the tunnel the guide will explain this 'transformation' and will take out some prompts such as an umbrella and a microphone.

## PART 2: TOURIST IN OWN CITY - COAST

- There are two key locations we visit: Croatian National Theatre and Molo longo (promenade). These are 'popular' spaces in Rijeka that everyone knows and has visited
- At those spaces, the guides act as tourist guides, telling common stories about the locations (history/meaning/interesting fact/current use... anything that will, in some way, bring this space closer to us)
- First stop is the Croatian National Theatre where the guide tells a story and ask some of the questions:
  10. What emotions does this space evoke in you?
  11. What's one thing you would do to make this space feel more welcoming to other 'tourists' like you?
  12. You're in this place for the first time, what do you notice?
  13. As a tourist, what do you find surprising about this space?
  14. Does this space feel different now that you're seeing it as a tourist? What's causing that feeling?

## WANDERING

- After the short discussion, the guide tells the participants to get in the role of tourists, and as tourists get to the second location (Molo longo) by themselves. The guide asks them to take photos of interesting things they see.
- When everyone meets at the beginning of Molo longo guide asks questions about the wandering:
  - 15. Did you take a different route than usual?
  - 16. Did you take a different route than usual?

## MOLO LONGO

- The guide tells a narrative about Molo longo and asks these or similar questions:
  - 17. What emotions does this space evoke in you?
  - 18. What's something about this space that you've never noticed before?
  - 19. Does this space feel different now that you're seeing it as a tourist? What's causing that feeling?

## MESSAGE TO THE CITY

- At the end of the tour, the whole group sits in a cafe and before we officially finish the tour, we distribute cards with questions and give participants a few minutes to write down their answers (Petra):
  - 20. What impressions stayed with you during today's tour?
- We ask participants to upload their photos to a Google Drive folder via a QR code (Petra).

# 5. Observation guide

## List of questions

### HIDDEN LAYERS

1. How does being in this space make you feel?
2. If this was your neighbourhood, how would you use this space?
3. Does this place remind you of anywhere you've been before, or does it connect to a personal memory or experience?
4. What are some problems of this space that you notice?
5. If you could transform this space into anything you wanted, what would you do? Why?
6. What's one thing you would add or remove here to make it more inviting or useful to the community?
7. How does this space challenge what you thought you knew about this part of the city?
8. What's one detail about this place that you've never noticed before, and how does it change your perspective?
9. What makes this space feel exotic or unusual?
10. What's one thing about this space that you find unexpectedly beautiful or interesting?

### CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE

1. What emotions does this space evoke in you?
2. What's one thing you would do to make this space feel more welcoming to other 'tourists' like you?
3. If you were seeing this place for the first time, what would stand out to you?
4. What's something about this space that you've never noticed before?
5. What would a tourist find surprising or unusual about this place?
6. Does this space feel different now that you're seeing it as a tourist? What's causing that feeling?



## WANDERING

1. Did you take a different route than usual?
2. Did you take a different route than usual?

## MOLOLONGO

1. What emotions does this space evoke in you?
2. What's something about this space that you've never noticed before?
3. Does this space feel different now that you're seeing it as a tourist? What's causing that feeling?

## POSTCARD TO THE CITY

1. What do you take away from today's tour?

### Location 1 - Primorski park

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Behaviour (**Body language**: leaning in, crossing arms, or looking around, **Movement**: walking slowly, stopping frequently, or rushing through, **Interaction with space**: looking at objects, sitting, touching objects, or taking photos):

Comments (on own initiative: when not asked questions):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Questions & answers:

### Location 2 - Gomila

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Behaviour (**Body language**: leaning in, crossing arms, or looking around, **Movement**: walking slowly, stopping frequently, or rushing through, **Interaction with space**: looking at objects, sitting, touching objects, or taking photos):

Comments (on own initiative: when not asked questions):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Questions & answers:

### Location 3 - Random park

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Behaviour (**Body language**: leaning in, crossing arms, or looking around, **Movement**: walking slowly, stopping frequently, or rushing through, **Interaction with space**: looking at objects, sitting, touching objects, or taking photos):

Comments (on own initiative: when not asked questions):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Questions & answers:

### Walking

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Behaviour (**Body language**: leaning in, crossing arms, or looking around, **Movement**: walking slowly, stopping frequently, or rushing through, **Interaction with space**: looking at objects, sitting, touching objects, or taking photos):

Comments (on own initiative: when not asked questions):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Additional notes:

### Transformation tunnel

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Behaviour (**Body language**: leaning in, crossing arms, or looking around, **Movement**: walking slowly, stopping frequently, or rushing through, **Interaction with space**: looking at objects, sitting, touching objects, or taking photos):

Comments (on own initiative: when not asked questions):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Additional notes:

### Wandering reflection

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Behaviour (**Body language**: leaning in, crossing arms, or looking around, **Movement**: walking slowly, stopping frequently, or rushing through, **Interaction with space**: looking at objects, sitting, touching objects, or taking photos):

Comments (on own initiative, what are they talking about among each other):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Questions & answers:

### Location 4 - Molo Longo

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Behaviour (**Body language**: leaning in, crossing arms, or looking around, **Movement**: walking slowly, stopping frequently, or rushing through, **Interaction with space**: looking at objects, sitting, touching objects, or taking photos):

Comments (on own initiative: when not asked questions):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Questions & answers:

### Postcard from the city

Facial expressions (emotional response, engagement):

Comments (on own initiative: when not asked questions):

Group dynamics (passive/active, interaction):

Questions & answers:

### Reflective journal

Overall impressions:

Patterns:

Implications:

Additional notes: