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Enhancing the Tourist Attractiveness of Rural Areas through Authentic and Participatory Gastronomy Tourism Experiences

Abstract

Gastronomy, as a rich resource in Slavonia, can be used to design personalised and co-creative gastronomy experiences that can attract tourists and enhance the tourist attractivity of this region. Therefore, the purpose and aim of this study were to examine the attitudes of potential tourists regarding the importance of various elements of the offer that influence the likelihood of visiting, as well as to examine whether and how gastronomy and its associated heritage, along with the possibility of personalized approach to the design of tourist experience, impact the increased purpose to visit the mentioned area. The theoretical part of this study relies on relevant research on the topic of rural and gastro tourism in the context of post-pandemic tourist preferences, as well as on the concepts of inclusive and co-creative design of the tourist experience. For the purposes of the empirical part of the research, a survey questionnaire was designed and distributed via social networks and other digital channels. The research was conducted on a random sample of 385 respondents from 19 Croatian counties. The data were analysed using various methods of descriptive and inferential statistics, with the statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) used as the analysis tool. Kendal Tau-b correlation and ordinal regression analysis were used to determine the importance of individual elements in choosing tourist destinations. Research results indicate that the majority of the respondents perceive Slavonia as a region with authentic and recognizable gastronomy offer, and that experientially rich tourist prod-

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ucts based on co-creation of experiences are significant predictors of an increased intention to visit the mentioned region from a tourism perspective. These insights can serve as arguments for stakeholders in tourism development policies that gastronomy and its associated heritage can be an effective means of enhancing the attractiveness of the tourism offer. Limitations of this study primarily lie in the representativeness of the sample due to the fact that more than a half of the respondents are from counties that are geographically part of the studied region, as well as in the respondents' insufficient understanding of the concept of co-creation. According to the authors' knowledge, similar studies have not been conducted in the mentioned region nor at the national level in Croatia. Therefore, this study will contribute to new scientific insights on co-creative gastro-tourism products as a means for enhancing the attractiveness of tourist destinations.

Keywords: rural tourism, gastronomy tourism, tourist perception, co-creation

1. INTRODUCTION

History has repeatedly demonstrated the vulnerability of tourism in times of economic, health, and other crisis situations, but also its remarkable capacity for rapid transformation and adaptation (Kriaučiūnasa, Liutikasa, & Burneika, 2023). This is especially true for specific forms of tourism and development based on the principles of 6 E for tourism: experience, excitement, escape, education, entertainment, and ecology, as well as the 4 M: moderate growth, multidiversification, multitasking, and mobile technology. Throughout history, tourism has proven to be both resilient and adaptable in the face of economic, health, and other crises, which is why it has rightfully earned the title of a par excellence global phenomenon of the modern age (Tubić, 2019). This was particularly reflected in the increased interest in traveling to rural destinations, which, during the times of health insecurity, provided tourists a refuge of peace and a sense of isolation, while at the same time giving them the opportunity to immerse themselves in local culture, a calmer way of life, healthier habits and, not less importantly, the consumption of locally grown food. The preparation and consumption of food and wine are inseparable parts of social culture that encompass all aspects of human life. Aside from satisfying basic physiological needs, they also serve as a powerful tool of emotional connection between the providers of tourism and hospitality services and their guests. As emphasized by Crick, Crick and Tebbet (2020), this interaction plays a key role in promoting the destination as an interesting and valuable experience for every visitor. In addition to natural attractions, preserved and clean nature, and calming and relaxing environment, the foundation for enhancing the competitive advantages and attractiveness of rural tourist destinations should primarily be sought in rich intangible cultural heritage, gastronomy and oenology, recognizable lifestyle of local residents, and in enabling active tourist participation in creating an authentic experience. The mentioned aspects present those elements of the offer that contemporary tourists show the greatest interest (Anton, Camarero, Laguna and Buhalis, 2019; Pratt, Suntikul and Agyeiwaah 2020; Lee 2023). Slavonia as a region has an immensely rich cultural heritage and it

builds its market positioning mostly on rural, gastro end oeno tourism, as well as on heritage tourism, among others. Therefore, the authors of this paper have chosen to examine the preferences of potential tourists towards Slavonia as a region of participatory, experientially rich tourist experiences and their interest in visiting Slavonia for tourism as the subject of research in this work. The findings and conclusions of the research can serve the destination management as well as tourism service providers in the mentioned region for the development of a more attractive offer in the segment of gastronomy tourism. Additionally, they can serve as a concept for planning a more competitive tourist offer in other destinations with similar attraction bases.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Travel is a strong aspiration or even a need in both developed and developing countries (Telišman-Košuta, 2020: 63). Changes in human habits and preferences, as well as consumer affinity are reflected in the sustainability of tourism as a global socio-economic phenomenon (Tubić, 2019: 41). It is therefore important to mention that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on tourist consumer behaviour patterns during travel (Scuttari, Ferraretto, Stawinoga and Walder, 2021; Wang, Wang, He and Zhu, 2022). Generally speaking, the specifics and particular behaviour patterns are evident in the analysis of the profile of the contemporary tourist consumer. This refers to an educated, independent, experienced, informed, spontaneous, environmentally conscious and demanding tourist who rationally manages their free time and financial resources. During travel, they want to participate actively in the direct delivery of the experience outside of the domain of traditional tourist products and services because for them, those represent a medium for personal fulfilment and identity.

2.1 Rural tourism in the context of the preference changes of contemporary tourists

In the post-pandemic period, rural tourism is becoming an increasingly attractive and demanded tourism product (Yang, 2022), with the prospect of

growth and development, and surely an increased demand in the coming years. This was certainly contributed to by the ability and opportunity for a quicker recovery and response to negative effects because as Marco-Lajara, Úbeda-García, Ruiz-Fernández, Poveda-Pareja and Sánchez-García (2022) note, rural tourism has suffered less damage during the pandemic, as compared to other types and forms of tourism – it was perceived as the leading choice and a safer option. Sustainable and resistant rural tourism could become an attractive alternative to mass tourism (Batista, Castanho, Sousa, Couto and Pimente, 2023; Kriaučiūnasa et al., 2023: 619), but not its complete substitute due to the established tourism infrastructure, financial inflows, employment opportunities, dependence, and impact on the economic growth that mass tourism provides.

Increased interest for rural tourism is also evident in the academic and research community. Numerous foreign and national authors have explored this topic. For example:

- Kušen (2006) examines the terminological framework of rural tourism and analyzes the components of the institutional framework in Croatia.
- Barbieri and Msheng (2008) investigate which internal characteristics of businesses and owners influence the success of agri-tourism enterprises in North America.
- Yun, Hennessey, and Courtney (2011) conduct an empirical study in Canada on the relationship between perceived motives and activities that attract rural tourists to a destination and the perceived importance of different motives and activities among rural and urban residents.
- Pesonen, Komppula, Kronenberg, and Peters (2011) empirically analyze the differences and relationships between push and pull motivational factors in rural tourism in Finland.
- Tubić (2015) conducts an empirical study on the institutional framework of rural tourism in Croatia from the perspective of national tourism policy creators and co-creators, as well as the state and trends of rural tourism in Continental Croatia from the perspective of owners of TSOs (tourism service and operational groups).

- Petračić (2018) explores the role of entrepreneurial projects in the development of sustainable rural tourism and the possibilities for their valorization in thirteen counties of Continental Croatia, excluding Zagreb as a predominantly urban area.
- Scuttari et al. (2021) examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected rural tourism travel patterns in South Tyrol, Italy.
- Kastenholz, Fernández-Ferrín, and Rodrigues (2021) analyze the role of nostalgia and sensory experiences in attracting tourists to purchase local products in Janeiro de Cima, Portugal, using a conditional process analysis.
- Batista et al. (2023) conduct an empirical assessment of rural tourist experiences in the Azores region.

This thesis is supported by searching the term rural tourism in Scopus as a reference basis. Within a thirty-year period (from 1986 until 2016), a total number of 596 various titles were published on the topic of rural tourism. On the other hand, in the period from 2017 until February 29, 2024, twice as many titles were published, a total number of 1,013.⁴ Precisely these findings strongly and convincingly corroborate the thesis of a growing interest of a scientific community for rural tourism.

The increase in income and surplus of free time throughout the year, the rise in the levels of formal and informal education, increased interest in traditional gastronomy, and awareness of health care are among the fundamental factors driving the demand for rural tourism products. Rural tourists have different consumer affinities, habits and priorities compared to classic, mass tourists (Ozkan and Gurbuz, 2023). It is important to emphasize that authentic local products and local food, as well as a way of experiencing the highly valued „authentic” rural experience lived in the certain place, where local food and handicrafts stand out as symbols of rurality and idealised past of certain locations and communities, serve as one of the most stimulating attractive factors for this type of tourists (Kastenholz et al., 2021: 605).

⁴ Scopus official website, available on <https://www.scopus-com.ezproxy.nsk.hr/search/form.uri?display=basic#basic> (Feb 29, 24).

2.1.1. Growing interest for authentic intangible heritage

Nowadays, tourism is evolving from a sector oriented to services into a sector oriented to experience (Richards, 2020, according Clatworthy, 2019.). In order for products to be successful and competitive in the market in times of global competition, in addition to providing the users with physical and functional properties, they also need to provide them with more intangible, i.e. experiential values (Alsetoohy, Ayoun and Abou-Kamar, 2021, according Lang and Lemmerer, 2019). This shift in the tourism paradigm demands adaptation of business strategies and focus on creating authentic, emotionally fulfilling experienced for the travellers. This includes the development of destination attractions that encourage interaction, engagement and a deeper connection with local culture, natural beauty, service providers, local residents, and fellow tourists. Tourism products that offer only the basic services are no longer enough for meeting the needs of contemporary travellers that seek authentic and emotionally enriching experiences (Wiedmann, Labenz, Haase and Hennings, 2018; Rajamannar, 2021; Carvahlo, Kastenholz, Carneiro and Souza, 2023). Innovative approaches in tourism that emphasize the creation of unforgettable experiences are thus becoming the key for success in the competitive environment of global tourism market.

Gastronomy and oenology are integral parts of intangible cultural heritage and play a crucial role in shaping authentic and recognizable tourism products in rural destinations. Gastronomy tourism offers visitors an immersive way to engage with local cultures while serving as a key tool for preserving and promoting cultural identity (Crick et al., 2020). Recognizing this growing interest, both destination management and the academic community have explored gastronomy as a resource for developing unique tourism experiences (Hall & Sharples, 2004; Kivela & Crots, 2009; UNWTO, 2012; WFTA, 2022). Gastronomy tourism has gained popularity as a specialized tourism form, recording the highest tourist spending (Stone et al., 2019), and has become a major trend in contemporary tourism (Alsetoohy et al., 2021). ...

2.1.2. Evolving preferences - exploring authentic experiences

A special emphasis is put on the elements of intangible heritage that attract new generations of tourists, with particular focus on millennials (Stone, Migacz, Garibaldi, Stein and Wolf, 2020.). The combination of natural attractions of the destination with the elements of cultural heritage, part of which is also gastronomy, provides authentic and unique experiences.

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As confirmed by research conducted by the World Food and Travel Association (Stone et al., 2020), changes in the preferences of modern tourists have been observed, particularly in the growing interest in comprehensive gastrotourism experiences, which can be categorized into three groups. The first group is related to exploring the broader context of the gastronomic offer, including visits to family farms and producers of authentic food and beverages, as well as active participation in culinary and wine workshops. The second group focuses on the places of consumption. Modern gastro-tourists seek unique dining experiences, such as street food, tastings at family farms, market visits, or even shared meals with local hosts. The third group encompasses specially designed and specialized destination itineraries predominantly centered around gastronomy, often combined with other specific forms of tourism, such as cycling tourism, green tourism, and cultural tourism.

2.1.3. The Rise of Awareness of Social Responsibility and Sustainability

As stated by UNWTO (2020), today's tourists emphasize three key sustainability factors during their travels, particularly concerning tourism expenditure in destinations: economic, social, and environmental. In the context of

rural tourist destinations, environmental sustainability is most frequently highlighted, particularly through the aspects of authenticity and locality. In this regard, locally grown food and traditional gastronomy hold a special place, as they contribute not only to environmental sustainability but also to economic and social sustainability. Authentic food and traditional recipes help preserve cultural heritage and mitigate the negative effects of globalization. Additionally, sourcing seasonal ingredients from local producers reduces waste and the need for excessive stockpiling. Tourists increasingly value eco-friendly practices, purchasing from family farms, and the implementation of sustainable business models.

2.1.4. The importance of co-creation in creating authentic tourist experiences

Modern tourism requires a shift from passive consumption to active participation, where tourists engage in the co-creation of experiences (Andrades & Dimache, 2014; Crick et al., 2020; Rachao et al., 2021). Co-creation allows tourists to actively shape their experiences rather than merely consuming pre-designed products (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Piller & Gulpen, 2016). This approach fosters social interaction among tourists and destination stakeholders, positioning visitors as key contributors in developing new tourism offerings in rural destinations (Piller & Gulpen, 2016). Enabling tourists to co-create enhances the quality of tourism products and overall visitor satisfaction.

This concept gains particular significance in rural tourist destinations, where tourists increasingly seek gastro-tourism experiences in informal settings such as farms and markets (Agyeiwah et al., 2018). In these environments, interaction with local communities plays a crucial role, as tourists are not merely observers but active participants. Activities such as culinary workshops, fruit and vegetable harvesting on farms or in nature, or involvement in various events centered around gastronomy and local traditions (Rachão et al., 2020) create deeper engagement and foster meaningful connections between visitors and lo-

cal hosts while simultaneously creating a unique, personalized experience for the guest.

By facilitating these interactive and immersive experiences, rural destinations can enhance their attractiveness and competitiveness. Studies show that rural destinations offering co-creation opportunities significantly increase tourists' intention to visit (Chathot et al., 2013; Altinay et al., 2016; Neuhofer & Buhalis, 2017; Campos et al., 2018; Sughatan & Runjan, 2019; Anton et al., 2019; Tregua et al., 2020).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A variety of study methods have been applied in this study with the aim of obtaining the most relevant insights and drawing competent conclusions. The theoretical part of the research was corroborated by recent research and empirical findings, as well as by the results from relevant national and foreign scientific and professional literature dealing with research of rural tourism and gastronomy tourism as specific forms of tourism of a great significance in the context of tourist preference shifts in the post-pandemic period. Moreover, the theoretical part of the research also includes sources covering the scientific interest for an inclusive approach of tourists towards the tourist experience, i.e. to co-creation of tourist experience. The scientific sources used are available in reputable international databases of scientific papers such as Web of Science and Scopus. Based on the reviewed scientific literature, empirical findings, tourism trends and ubiquitous changes in the tourism demand market, the following research objectives have been defined:

- To investigate the attitudes of potential domestic visitors and tourists on the elements of the tourism offer that influence their intention to visit.
- To investigate the extent to which gastronomy, healthy foods, tangible and intangible heritage and the possibility of co-creating the tourist experience are strong attractive factors and whether they impact the preferences of the respondents regarding Slavonia as a region that they would visit

3.1. Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses are proposed following the previously mentioned research problematics and defined research objectives:

HYPOTHESIS 1: The use of gastronomy as a resource for developing comprehensive tourist products within a co-creative experiential environment is aligned with the intentions of visitors to explore Slavonia as a tourist destination

- **HYPOTHESIS 1a:** There is a statistically significant correlation between recognizable and distinctive gastronomy and its associate intangible heritage with the intention of visiting Slavonia
- **HYPOTHESIS 1B:** There is a statistically significant correlation between the co-creation of the tourist experience and communication with service providers and local residents with the intention of visiting Slavonia

3.2 Research instrument and data collection

The authors have used the method of a questionnaire for the purpose of empirical research, i.e. gathering the most relevant and consistent data. It should be emphasized that the process of data collection took place in two phases:

- PHASE 1 (December 2022. - February 2023. on sample of 130 respondents) – The questionnaire in form of a Google electronic form was distributed via social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram). In this phase, the authors have noticed a high degree of demotivation and misunderstanding among the respondents.
- PHASE 2 (March – June 2023 on sample of 255 respondents) - The questionnaire was distributed via instant messaging applications (WhatsApp, Viber), utilizing the „snowball sampling” methodology (Pavić and Šundalić, 2021: 153). Finally, research was conducted on the convenient sample of 385 respondents.

3.3 Data analysis methods

During data analysis, various techniques of de-

scriptive and inferential statistics were utilized, with the statistical program of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) being employed as the analysis tool. Frequency calculations were used to display the data, while the arithmetic mean was employed to display data obtained from questions utilizing the Likert scale. To determine the importance of individual elements in choosing tourist destinations, Kendall Tau-b correlation and ordinal regression analysis were used to measure the influence of specific variables on the likelihood of visit.

3.4. Discussion

From the total number of respondents (385), the research sample consists of respondents, residents of 19 Croatian counties (all Croatian Counties except Lika-Senj and Požega-Slavonia). The demographic indicators of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

It should be noted, and this is also one of the limitations of this study, that the overall percentage of the respondents from outside the counties within the Slavonia region is less than 50% (48.6%), which makes the research sample less representative since it is reasonable to assume that residents from outside of the mentioned region will have an increased motivation for visiting than the respondents living in the mentioned area. However, some research, e.g. Cai (2009) indicate that visitors from nearby regions and from within the rural tourist destinations make a significant part of the total number of visits and tourist consumption, and thus also an interesting segment of marketing activities of destination management. Due to the reason that the increased tourist interest for rural tourist destinations should be utilized for creating authentic and competitive tourist products, one of the research questions was to examine the importance of specific elements of a destination's offer that influence the choice of destination for a tourist travel. The main and auxiliary hypotheses were first tested using correlation analysis. Specifically, the importance of elements when choosing a tourist destination to visit was correlated on one side, and the intention to visit Slavonia on the other side, which was also investigated as part of the research. Since

Table 1. The demographic indicators of the respondents

N=385	f	%	N=355	f	%
Gender			Work status		
Male	135	35,1	Employed	329	85,5
Female	250	64,9	Unemployed	23	6
Age	f	%	Pensioner	17	4,4
18 - 25	30	7,8	Student	16	4,2
26 - 35	102	26,5	Monthly income (Euro)	f	%
36 - 45	125	32,5	Up 660	48	12,5
46 - 59	108	28,1	661 - 1.330	15	39,2
60 and more	20	5,2	1.331 - 1.990	107	27,8
Marital status	f	%	1.991 - 2.650	56	11,9
Married	230	59,7	More than 2.650	33	8,6
Extramarital union	61	15,8	County of residence	f	%
Single	68	17,7	Bjelovar-Bilogora	18	4,7
Divorced	20	5,2	Brod-Posavina	1	0,3
Widower/widow	6	1,6	Dubrovnik-Neretva	3	0,8
Population (place of permanent residence)	f	%	Istria	5	1,3
Up to 5000	89	23,1	Karlovac County	1	0,3
5001 - 10 000	80	20,8	Koprivnica-Križevci	29	7,5
10 001 - 30 000	82	21,3	Krapina-Zagorje	2	0,5
30 001 -50 000	17	4,4	Međimurje	1	0,3
50001 - 100 000	23	6	Osijek-Baranja	33	8,6
More than 100 000	91	23,6	Primorje-Gorski Kotar	19	4,9
Total	382	99,2	Sisak-Moslavina	3	0,8
Missing System	3	0,8	Split-Dalmatia	8	2,1
Educational level	f	%	Varaždin	10	2,6
Primary school	2	0,5	Virovitica-Podravina	158	41
Three-year secondary school	25	6,5	Vukovar-Srijem	6	1,6
Four-year secondary school	101	26,2	Zadar	4	1
Undergraduate degree	62	16,1	Zagreb County	13	3,4
Graduate degree	129	33,5	City of Zagreb	71	18,4
Master's degree	46	11,9			
Doctorate	20	5,2			

the importance of destination-related elements was assessed using Likert-type questions with agreement levels ranging from 1 to 5, and the intention to visit the region was measured on an ordinal scale, the Kendall tau-b correlation was selected for calculating correlations. For correlation calculations, statistically significant association was considered to exist at a minimum significance level of 0.05 (95% confidence level, or at most 5% risk of identifying an association that does not exist in the population). In this case, the first variable is the importance of destination offer elements in making a decision about tourism visit, while the second variable is the intention to visit Slavonia. Out of the eleven offered elements shown in Table 2, statistically

significant correlation with the intention to visit the mentioned region was not found for three elements (proximity and possibility of using water surfaces for swimming and other water activities, landscape beauty, and richness of tangible heritage). For all other elements of the offer, statistical significance was found, with particular emphasis on the characteristic and recognizable gastronomy offer, the possibility of communication with hosts and local residents, and the potential for co-creating the tourist experience (coefficient 0.17), where the p-value of <0.01 indicated a very high statistical significance of the correlation between the elements of the offer and the intention of tourists to visit Slavonia.

Table 2. Correlation (Kendal tau-b) between the significance of elements for visiting the destination and the likelihood of visiting Slavonia

Significance of elements for visiting the destination	Likelihood of visiting Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem
Proximity and possibility of using water surfaces for swimming and other water activities	-0.01
Landscape beauty	-0.02
Preserved and clean nature	0.06
Possibility of outdoor recreation (trekking trails, cycling...)	0.06
Characteristic and recognizable gastronomy offer	0.17**
Healthy food and traceability of food "from farm to table"	0.15**
Rich intangible heritage (specific way of life and work of the local community, unique folklore, music, handicrafts...)	0.16**
Rich tangible cultural heritage (historical monuments, castles and manors preserved within the rural area, ethno villages...)	0.06
Smaller accommodation and other catering facilities with personal guest approach	0.15**
Possibility of communication with hosts and his/her family and with local community	0.17**
Possibility of co-creating the tourist experience (combining contents and activities in cooperation with service providers, tailored tourist products...)	0.17**

Note: * p <0.05; ** p<0.01

Table 3. Ordinal regression with the likelihood of visiting Slavonia as a criterion variable (The importance of specific elements of a destination's offer as predictors of tourist visits)

<i>Importance of the variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Interval (95%)</i>
<i>Proximity and possibility of using water surfaces for swimming and other water activities</i>	-0.05	0.10	0.21	0.65	-0.25 to 0.16
<i>Landscape beauty</i>	-0.39	0.21	3.34	0.07	-0.80 to 0.03
<i>Preserved and clean nature</i>	0.26	0.21	1.59	0.21	-0.14 to 0.66
<i>Possibility of outdoor recreation (trekking trails, cycling...)</i>	-0.03	0.11	0.07	0.80	-0.25 to 0.19
<i>Characteristic and recognizable gastronomy offer</i>	0.35	0.13	7.10	0.01	0.09 to 0.61
<i>Rich tangible cultural heritage (historical monuments, castles and manors preserved within the rural area, ethno villages...)</i>	0.08	0.12	0.43	0.51	-0.31 to 0.16
<i>Smaller accommodation and other catering facilities with personal guest approach</i>	0.16	0.12	1.69	0.19	-0.08 to 0.39
<i>Possibility of co-creating the tourist experience (combining contents and activities in cooperation with service providers, tailored tourist products...)</i>	0.23	0.12	4.13	0.04	0.01 to 0.46
<i>Gender: male</i>	-0.06	0.21	0.07	0.80	-0.49 to 0.37
<i>Age 18-25</i>	0.07	0.22	0.07	0.94	-1.48 to 1.61
<i>Age 26-35</i>	0.49	0.68	0.52	0.47	-0.84 to 1.81
<i>Age 36-45</i>	0.61	0.66	0.86	0.35	-0.68 to 1.90
<i>Age 46-59</i>	0.50	0.63	0.62	0.43	-0.74 to 1.74
<i>Number of inhabitants – up to 5000</i>	0.32	0.31	1.06	0.30	-0.29 to 0.92
<i>Number of inhabitants 5001-10 000</i>	-0.07	0.32	0.04	0.83	-0.69 to 0.56
<i>Number of inhabitants 10 001-30 000</i>	0.51	0.31	2.27	0.10	-0.10 to 1.12

To verify the main and two auxiliary hypotheses in a multivariate manner, ordinal regression with the intention to visit the region as the criterion variable was conducted. Different destination elements, i.e. the assessment of their importance for visiting the destination, were included as predictor variables in the analysis. Due to multicollinearity issues, the following elements were excluded from the analysis: 1 healthy food and traceability of food „from farm to table”; 2 intan-

gible heritage; and 3 the possibility of communication with hosts. Namely, the first and second variables were highly correlated with characteristic and recognizable gastronomic offer (0.58 and 0.53, respectively), while the third was correlated with the possibility of co-creating tourist experience (0.59). Control variables included in the analysis were: *gender, age divided into five age categories, size of the place of residence, level of education, employment status, family income.*

Table 3. Continued

Importance of the variable	Coefficient	Standard error	Wald	Sig.	Interval (95%)
Number of inhabitants 30 001-50 000	-0.10	0.52	0.04	0.84	-1.12 to 0.92
Number of inhabitants 50 001-100 000	-0.18	0.46	0.15	0.70	-1.09 to 0.73
Work status – employed	-0.03	0.60	0.00	0.97	-1.20 to 1.14
Work status – unemployed	-0.46	0.69	0.45	0.50	-1.81 to 0.89
Work status – pensioner	0.14	0.91	0.03	0.87	-0.93 to 1.67
Marital status – married	-0.30	0.47	0.30	0.59	-1.19 to 0.67
Marital status – extramarital union	-0.69	0.54	1.58	0.21	-1.75 to 0.38
Marital status – single	-0.10	0.53	0.04	0.84	-1.13 to 0.93
Educational level – three-year secondary school or less	-0.56	0.47	1.41	0.24	-1.49 to 0.37
Educational level – four-year secondary school	0.15	0.35	0.18	0.68	-0.54 to 0.83
Educational level – undergraduate degree	0.69	0.38	3.31	0.07	-0.05 to 1.43
Educational level – Master's degree	0.22	0.31	0.53	0.47	-0.38 to 0.82
Income of up to 660 Euros	0.51	0.49	1.11	0.29	-0.44 to 1.47
Income 661-1330 Euros	0.78	0.39	4.10	0.04	0.03 to 1.53
Income 1331-1990 Euros	0.80	0.39	4.11	0.04	0.03 to 1.57
Income 1991-2650 Euros	0.79	0.44	3.17	0.08	-0.08 to 1.65

Notes: reference categories are: gender – female; age – older up to 60 years; number of inhabitants – more than 100,000; work status – students; marital status – divorced; educational level – Master's degree or doctoral degree; income – more than 2,650 Euros.

The results of the conducted ordinal regression have shown that the model predicts the criterion variable more successfully than the model without predictor variables (chi-square value is 59.71; $p=0.00$), and the pseudo R^2 measures are as follows: Cox and Snell = 0.15; Nagelkerke = 0.16; McFadden = 0.07. It is evident from Table 3 that among the elements being evaluated, “distinctive and recognizable gastronomy offer” and “possibility of co-creating the tourist experience (combining contents and activities in cooperation with service providers, tailored tourist products...)” are emphasized as statistically

important predictors for visiting this region. It can be observed that for each increase in the importance of distinctive and recognizable gastronomic offer by one point, the likelihood of a person to visit the region increases by 1.42. Similarly, for each increase in the importance of the possibility of co-creation of the tourist experience by one point, the odds ratio for visiting the region increases by 1.26. With regard to control variables, or demographic indicators, only monthly income shows statistical significance as a predictor of visiting the region. The highest probability of visiting is recorded in the highest

income category (above 2,650 Euros), although this relationship is not entirely linear.

Based on the results obtained through ordinal regression analysis, it can be concluded that the guests who consider elements of characteristic and recognizable gastronomy offerings as well as the opportunity to co-create their tourist experience, as more important while visiting the destination, are more likely to visit Slavonia as tourist destination. Thus it can be inferred that *auxiliary hypotheses H1a and H1b are confirmed by the analysis of the obtained data.*

4. CONCLUSION

Contemporary tourists seek authentic and experientially rich travels, which rural destinations can offer due to their resource base. Competitiveness and differentiation should be achieved through tourism development based on preserved natural and anthropogenic resources, alongside creating immersive experiences. In the context of growing concern for tourists' well-being, traditional gastronomic heritage serves as a key resource for enhancing attractiveness, building competitive advantages, and increasing economic and social benefits for local communities through higher visitation and tourist spending. Slavonia as a region stands out particularly for its rich gastronomic culture and other elements of intangible heritage related to food and beverage production, as well as the lifestyle of local residents. This is further supported by research conducted by Leko Šimić and Štimac (2011) and Boranić-Živoder et al. (2020), which found that the key attributes of domestic tourists' perception of Slavonia are precisely its high-quality and recognizable food, preserved traditions, and hospitable, friendly hosts. Destinations and tourism offerings based on these distinctive attributes have already gained recognition in the Croatian tourism market. Baranja, as a micro-region with Karanac and other rural destinations, has become a tourism brand of the entire eastern Croatia. Festivals such as HeadOnEast, Čvarak Fest, Iločka Berba Grožđa (Ilok Grape Harvest), and the Wine Marathon in Zmajevac attract an increasing number of tourists each year. According to data from county tourist boards collected through the eVisitor

system, in the past five years, the number of overnight stays has grown at an average rate of 7%, while accommodation capacities (number of beds) have increased by 24%. Considering the positioning of the mentioned region as a gastronomy tourism destination, the research conducted for the purpose of this study also examined the intention to visit the region. Among the respondents, 313 individuals (81.3%) stated that they would probably or definitely visit the region. When looking at the results of the statistical analysis, it was found that original and recognizable gastronomy, intangible heritage, availability of healthy food with traceability "from farm to table", the possibility of interaction and communication with hosts and local residents, and the possibility of co-creation as a process of creating personalized tourist experiences emerged as the most significant predictors associated with an increased intention of respondents to visit Slavonia as tourist destination. *The results of the conducted research confirmed the hypothesis stating that the attractiveness of Slavonia as a tourist destination can be increased by developing tourism products based on authentic gastronomy enriched with additional experiential elements that arise through the co-creation process involving guests and stakeholders in the destination.* These findings can serve the destination management and service providers in the mentioned region for future planning of the development of tourist offer in the segment of rural and gastronomy tourism, as well as provide other destinations with similar resource characteristics with valuable guidelines for the development of their tourist offer. One of the most significant limitations of this research lies in the demotivation, misunderstanding, and disinterest of the respondents, even though the communication process, as well as the process of data collection, were tailored to various affinities and preferences of the respondents. Additionally, another key limitation is that the research did not include potential tourists from countries that, according to available data (eVisitor), visit Slavonia the most. This assumes that their opinions would likely differ to some extent from those of potential tourists from Croatia. These facts imply the need for future research aimed at a wider population of potential visitors, including the Adriatic area of Croatia, major cities, and closer foreign mar-

kets. Moreover, future research should also be expanded in terms of content in order to investigate which gastronomy tourism contents and activities are preferred by potential tourists. Additionally, it is necessary to examine the attitudes of supply-side stakeholders concerning co-creation, understood as the process of their active participation as service providers in the creation of innovative tourism products in rural areas.

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Povećanje turističke atraktivnosti ruralnih prostora temeljem autentičnih i participativnih gastroturističkih iskustava

Sažetak

Gastronomija, kao bogat resurs u Slavoniji, može se koristiti za dizajniranje personaliziranih i sukreativnih gastronomskih doživljaja koji mogu privući turiste i podići turističku atraktivnost regije. Stoga su svrha i cilj rada bili ispitati stavove potencijalnih turista o važnosti pojedinih elemenata ponude koji utječu na vjerojatnost posjete te ima li i kakav utjecaj gastronomija i s njom povezano nasljeđe te mogućnost personaliziranog pristupa dizajnu turističkog doživljaja na povećanu namjeru posjete navedenoj regiji. Teorijski dio rada oslanja se na relevantna istraživanja o ruralnom i gastroturizmu u kontekstu postpandemijskih preferencija turista, te na koncepte inkluzivnog i sukreativnog dizajna turističkog iskustva, dok je za potrebe empirijskog dijela rada dizajniran anketni upitnik koji je distribuiran putem društvenih mreža i drugih digitalnih kanala. Istraživanje je provedeno na slučajnom uzorku od 385 ispitanika iz devetnaest hrvatskih županija. Podaci su obrađeni različitim tehnikama deskriptivne i inferencijalne statistike, a kao alat analize korišten je statistički program SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Za utvrđivanje važnosti pojedinih elementa pri odabiru turističkih destinacija korištena je Kandal Tau-b korelacija te ordinalna regresijska analiza. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju kako većina ispitanika Slavoniju percipira kao regiju izvorne i prepoznatljive gastronomske ponude te da su iskustveno bogati proizvodi temeljeni na sukreaciji doživljaja značajan prediktor povećane namjere posjete navedenoj regiji u turističkom smislu. Dobivene spoznaje mogu poslužiti nositeljima razvojnih turističkih politika kao argument da gastronomija i s njome povezano nasljeđe može biti učinkovito sredstvo za podizanje atraktivnosti turističke ponude. Ograničenja istraživanja mogu se sagledati prvenstveno u reprezentativnosti uzorka zbog činjenice da je više od polovice ispitanika iz županija koje su geografski sastavni dio regije koja je bila predmetom istraživanja te nedovoljnom razumijevanju pojma sukreacije od strane ispitanika. Prema saznanjima autora slična istraživanja u spomenutoj regiji a i na razini Hrvatske nisu provedena te će slijedom navedenoga ovaj rad doprinijeti novim znanstvenim spoznajama o sukreativnim gastroturističkim proizvodima kao sredstvu za podizanje atraktivnosti turističkih destinacija.

Ključne riječi: ruralni turizam, gastroturizam, percepcija turista, sukreacija