
THE DEVELOPMENT OF COUNTRYSIDE WALKING TOURISM IN THE TIME OF THE POST-COVID CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

With low investment, countryside walking tourism contributes to the rapid recovery of rural tourism in the post-covid time. The research purpose is to examine factors that impact the interest of tourists in the state-supported countryside walking tourism. The sample consisted of 467 respondents from the general public. The SPSS software was used for processing data. The results indicated that safety, content, and price are the most influential factors. For females, slightly more important factors were related to the possibility of consuming authentic food and beverages, buying traditional handmade products, the inclusion of the local population, and the well-being of urban residents. A village, with authentic local houses and cuisine, and local tour guides, are the epicenter of countryside walking tourism. Embedding countryside walking tourism in sustainable rural tourism development policies is recommended. The research contributes to the integration between sustainable rural development and sustainable tourism development.

Introduction

One of the most vibrant industries in the world is tourism due to the continual and dedicated focus of countries worldwide on developing their local characteristics and natural resources, especially in the rural areas, and planning to increase the number of tourists and duration of stay to create the higher value (Lin et al., 2022). In the 1970s-'80s, rural tourism grew in many parts of the world, describing rural tourism through rural tourism activities (Silva, 2022).

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Due to the heterogeneity of characteristics, rural tourism is not uniquely defined and there is no single tourism model, and most researchers support the concept of sustainable rural tourism development based on Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter SDG) (Polukhina et al., 2021). Bearing in mind that the SDG requires creativity, knowledge, technology, and financial resources, the United Nations adopted 17 SDGs in 2015 to launch global activities to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure world peace and prosperity by 2030 (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). In 12 countries around the world, tourism is linked to SDG 11 on *Sustainable Cities and Communities* and they agree that tourism affects the renewal of traditional villages, the promotion of quality products, and the development of short supply chains and local markets, for more efficient and effective access of small producers to market (WTO & UNDP, 2017). The research in the Stavropol region shows that the parallel development of the agricultural sector and non-agricultural sector, such as the development of rural tourism, contributes to increasing the employment rate in rural areas in Russia (Ivolga & Shakhramanian, 2019). “The total impact of rural tourism in European rural areas exceeds 65 billion euros” (Štetić, Šimičević, 2017, p. 65). The importance of rural tourism, viewed from the aspect of the problem of environmental pollution, distance of people from nature, standardization, and uniformity in modern lifestyle, is reflected in the growing interest of people to return to nature and a healthy lifestyle (Vujović et al., 2012). After the pandemic, the importance of rural tourism is greater in terms of which it contributes to preserving and improving human health, as well as the possibility of rapid recovery of tourism, „as a complementary activity that will complement agriculture as the main activity” (Štetić, Šimičević, 2017, p. 64) of the rural area.

Although the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the development of rural tourism has been insufficiently researched, the findings of some studies indicate a positive impact of the pandemic on rural tourism, citing the need of tourists for a safer or less risky place due to smaller population, but the findings of certain studies showed that the impact of the pandemic is not uniform in surrounding (Silva, 2022). In the pre-pandemic period, the role of rural tourism was to relieve the stress of urban residents (Polukhina et al., 2021). During the anti-pandemic measures, people were isolated in apartments in the cities with limited walking and fear of pneumonia, while the post-pandemic period is characterized by the increased value of living in the countryside (Polukhina et al., 2021).

From the aspect of the population, cities and villages are inhabited by an equal number of people, but from the aspect of space, cities occupy 1 to 3% of the world's land mass (Landy, Moreau, 2015). The right to the city and the right to the village is the same thing, but “there is a risk that the right to the city might make many forget the countryside.” (Landy, Moreau, 2015, pp. 18-19). Like the urban areas, the countryside areas have institutional management and administration. A village administration consists of village officials who include “all officials, employees, consultants, agents, and others who work for or with the Village at all times while on or in Village Property, whether on duty or off duty, and contractors and vendors, and their personnel, when engaged in work for or business with the Village” (Law Insider, 2022). “Creation of competitive and innovative

sector of agriculture cannot be imagined without strong connection of public and private sector, without strong connection of the state, education, science, consultants and farmers“ (Cvijanović, 2009, p. 72). Taking into consideration the diversity of roles, perspectives, and personalities of elected officials and administrative staff, their cooperation in village management is a complicated process that requires clear legislation, goodwill, and teamwork for the village to function effectively (League staff, 2022). Agritourism allows farmers to increase their income from agriculture with income from countryside tourism if the village can attract tourists with its natural and cultural resources and completed facilities for providing good accommodation (Kurniasih et al., 2018).

For the last 60 years, donor countries have provided aid of approximately 100 billion USD annually and their official development assistance has had a key role in sustainable development despite the fact that the development aid has not yet achieved the expected results (Balaskas et al., 2009). In order to achieve sustainable development of rural areas, it is necessary to focus on activities based on local area development making maximum use of local resources and capacities of the local community, which is feasible if local entrepreneurs' strategies are part of micro-region strategic documents (Šimkova, 2007). The competitiveness of the agro-food sector relies on standards, agriculture, and ICT (Bešić et. al., 2021). A strategic approach to tourism development enables the realization of a continuous synergy of economic, social, and environmental benefits from the development of tourism in a certain location and thus creates conditions for achieving a better quality of life and prosperity (Popesku, 2016). Local authorities in Western Europe look at rural tourism, as a key driver of local development, and under the EU's Leader Programme, 900 local action groups were launched wherefrom more than 70% promote tourism and the use of local heritage (Euracademy, 2003). Based on the research on a random sample of four tourist facilities that use the natural resources in the Republic of Srpska, a multi-criteria model can apply to the assessment of current and potential rural tourist capacities (Nedeljković et. al., 2022). The development of rural tourism should be based on entrepreneurial projects that include innovative food products (Čavić et. al., 2020). Due to the negative impacts of traditional agricultural production on the environment, “organic farming can be considered sustainable” (Tomaš Simin et. al., 2019, p. 274), and “the typical buyers of organic food are mostly female, with higher education and income, from the urban environment, and older age” (Mitić & Čolović, 2022, p. 360).

Rural tourism is a concept that includes various forms of tourism: ecotourism, rural tourism, agro-tourism, adventure tourism, and equestrian tourism (Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015). The mentioned forms of tourism include food and wine as the main motivation for visiting a rural destination (Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015). Walking is a universal tourist activity in all forms of tourism (Davies, 2018). Walking tourism refers to walking in nature, specifically in a rural area (Molgo & Etfi, 2021). “According to a survey by the English Tourist Board, 80% of tourists go on walks during their holiday without considering themselves “walkers”” (Kouchner & Lyard, 2001, p. 9). The development of walking tourism is an excellent investment since from the 1.38 euros investment,

almost 18 euros income is earned (Molgo & Etfi, 2021). Due to the fact that “tourists are spreading around the village in concentric circles until they “lose” energy” (Štetić, Šimičević, 2017, p. 63) and “a large number of villages are located near valuable cultural and historical monuments” (Borović et. al., 2022, p. 930), there is a need for the development of countryside walking tourism.

An active holiday is a trip outside the usual environment to participate in sports activities and maintain physical and mental health; it can include elements of relaxation, spa and wellness services, and healthy food (Halminen, 2019). Walking as a slow physical activity feasible without special equipment, facilities, and training, with clear health, environmental, economic, and social benefits, in the context of tourism contributes to the achievement of tourist destination competitiveness starting with the number of available footpaths and attractiveness of the route such as opportunities to enjoy nature, culture, and landscape (Simeoni & De Crescenzo, 2019). Not using vacation days contributes to the lack of communication or the inability to communicate with other people, creating social problems and social exclusion, whereas the use of vacations contributes to the quality of life and well-being of children and families as a whole (Quinn & Stacey, 2010). A family holiday, as a way to escape from hectic everyday life, is a way to relieve stress through family companionship contributing to the creation of moments where all family members are satisfied (Gram, 2005).

In order to determine the importance of state-based countryside walking tourism development, a basic hypothesis was that state-supported countryside walking tourism influences the interest of tourists because of safer stay, better content, and more affordable prices (H1). The following working hypotheses were set: there are differences in the thinking of the females and males regarding the factors that influence the interest of tourists in the state-supported countryside walking tourism (H2); there are differences according to age, marital status, number of children, education, work status, and annual personal investment for tourist travel and vacation regarding the factors that influence the interest of tourists in the state-supported countryside walking tourism (H3); villages and local populations are meaningful for the development of countryside walking tourism (H4); tourists choose authentic local cuisine and authentic local house on their trip and active vacation (H5); the role of local guides is significant for the countryside walking tourism development (H6).

Materials and Methods

The data was collected using the questionnaire prepared according to the method of closed-ended multiple-choice questions (Simeoni & De Crescenzo, 2019). The questionnaire was distributed to the general public using academic and social networks. The 467 questionnaires were collected from March 20th to May 2nd, 2022, and used for the research. The data were processed by SPSS software (version 16). The t-test and the Kruskal-Wallis H Test were used for the precise indication of statistically significant differences according to gender, and by age, marital status, number of children, education, work status, and annual personal investment for tourist travel and vacation respectively.

Results and Discussions

After the survey was conducted, applying the descriptive statistical analysis the authors observed that the majority of respondents were female (66.4%), compared to male (33.6%). In the age structure, the dominant group of respondents belonged to the age group from 36 to 55 years (52.9%) in relation to groups younger than 35 years (29, 2%) and older than 56 years (18.0%). More than half of the respondents (51%) were married, while 26.8% were single, 13.1% were cohabitation, and 9.2% were divorced and widowed. The majority of respondents (61.0%) had children, whereas 39.0% were childless. There were mostly (66.4%) university-educated respondents followed by (19.7%) respondents with secondary education and (12.8%) college, whereas 1.0% of respondents accounted with non-formal and primary education. According to the work status, numerous respondents were (69.9%) employed, (21.6%) unemployed, (6.4%) retired, and (2.1%) other.

Depending on the available funds that the respondents are willing to spend for their tourist trip and vacation (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the annual personal investment in tourist trip and vacation

Value label	Frequency	Percent
<500 euros	180	38.5
500-1000 euros	159	34.0
>1000 euros	128	27.4
Total	467	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations

38.5% of respondents were ready to annually invest in tourist trip and vacation less than 500 euros, 34.0% of respondents from 500 to 1,000 euros, and 27.4% more than 1,000 euros.

The research examined the type of food that tourists most often consume on their trip or active vacation (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the type of food consuming on the trip and active vacation

Value label	Frequency	Percent
self-prepared food	167	35.8
restaurant food	35	7.5
fast food	9	1.9
authentic local cuisine	256	54.8
Total	467	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations

The majority of respondents (54.8%) chose authentic local cuisine, followed by (35.8%) self-prepared food, (7.5%) restaurant food, and (1.9%) fast food.

For the purposes of the research, it was examined the type of accommodation tourists most often use on their trip or active vacation (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the type of accommodation on the trip or active vacation

Value label	Frequency	Percent
camping car	15	3.2
tent	28	6.0
hotel	93	19.9
hostel	6	1.3
apartment	86	18.4
authentic local house	239	51.2
Total	467	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations

On the trip and active vacation, respondents (51.2%) mostly chose to be accommodated at an authentic local house, then 19.9% of respondents chose a hotel, 18.4% apartment, 6.0% tent, 3.2% camping car, while the lowest number of respondents (1.3%) chose hostel. Since the research results indicated that the majority of respondents prefer choosing authentic local cuisine and authentic local house for accommodation, hypothesis H5 was confirmed.

Untouched nature is an extremely important factor in choosing a rural tourism destination. Accordingly, there were questions and processed results about the respondents' way of visiting and meeting untouched nature (Table 4).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the type of meeting with untouched nature

Value label	Frequency	Percent
using a map guide	112	24.0
using a certified tour guide from a commercial company	23	4.9
using a local tour guide with knowledge and experience in the area	332	71.1
Total	467	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations

The results indicated that the value of experienced local tour guides is of great importance (71.1%) confirming hypothesis H6. Also, 24.0% of respondents use a tourist map and 4.9% use the certified tour guide of a commercial company. The exceptional role of the local population in getting to know the areas visited by tourists is obvious.

As a part of the survey, the opinions of respondents were collected for the importance of villages and the influence of the local population on the rural area (Table 5).

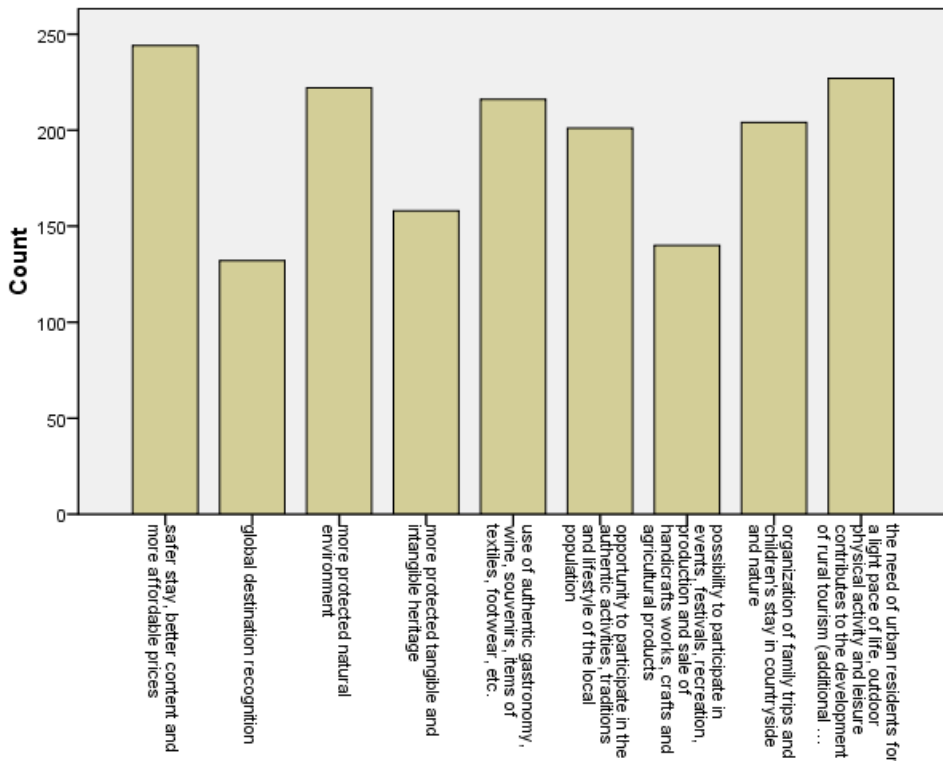
Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the meaningful of the village and local population in rural areas

Value label	Frequency	Percent
no	336	71.9
yes	73	15.6
indifferent	58	12.4
Total	467	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations

The opinion of the majority of respondents (71.9%) was that villages and local populations are meaningful for rural areas which additionally confirms the importance and the role of villages and rural population in the development of countryside walking tourism as a form of rural tourism. In this regard, hypothesis H4 was confirmed.

The results of respondents' opinions on whether walking tourism in rural areas would be a part of the country's sustainable development strategy, and how it would influence the interest of tourists are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The factors of state-supported countryside walking tourism on the interest of tourists

Source: Authors' calculations

The most frequent factor was “safer stay, better content, and more affordable prices” (I-1) supported by 244 (13.99%) respondents followed by factors: “the need of urban residents for a light pace of life, outdoor physical activity and leisure contribute to the development of rural tourism” (I-9), and “more protected natural environment” (I-3) supported by 227 (13.02%) and 222 (12.73%) respondents respectively. In addition, the following six factors were chosen by the respondents: “use of authentic gastronomy, wine, souvenirs, items of textiles, footwear, etc. “ (I-5) 216 (12.38%), „organization of family trips and children’s stay in countryside and nature” (I-8) 204 (11.70%), “opportunity to participate in the authentic activities, traditions, and lifestyle of the local population” (I-6) 201 (11.52%), “more protected tangible and intangible heritage” (I-4) 158 (9.06%), “possibility to participate in events, festivals, recreation, production and sale of handicrafts works, crafts, and agricultural products” (I-7) 140 (8.03%), and “global destination recognition” (I-2) 132 (7.57%) respondents. The results of descriptive statistics confirmed hypothesis H1 that if countryside walking tourism would be supported by the state, the most influential factor that would affect the interest of tourists would be related to safety, content, and price.

The research determined whether there is a difference in the thinking of women and men when it comes to factors of state-supported countryside walking tourism and their influence on the interest of tourists (Table 6).

Table 6. The results of the t-test and statistically significant differences by gender

Factors of state-supported countryside walking tourism on the interest of tourists	t-test for Equality of Means						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
I-1	1,378	465	,169	,06745	,04893	-,02870	,16361
I-2	,299	465	,765	,01321	,04420	-,07364	,10007
I-3	,320	465	,749	,01568	,04902	-,08065	,11200
I-4	,438	465	,662	,02032	,04644	-,07093	,11157
I-5	2,308	320,162	,022	,11146	,04829	,01646	,20647
I-6	2,328	324,544	,021	,11105	,04771	,01719	,20492
I-7	,228	465	,820	,01023	,04497	-,07814	,09861
I-8	1,913	321,380	,057	,09195	,04806	-,00260	,18649
I-9	2,637	318,094	,009	,12776	,04844	,03246	,22306

Source: Authors' calculations

Results of the t-test and Cohen's criteria for interpreting differences (Cohen, 1988, pp. 284-287) indicated small statistically significant differences for the following factors: I-5 between females (M=0.5000, SD=0.48898) and males (M=0.3885, SD=0.50081), $t(320.162)=2.308$, $p=0.22$, Mean difference 0.11, 95% CI: 0.02 to 0.21, eta square=0.011, meaning that the gender difference explains only 1.1% of

the variance of factor I-5; I-6 between females ($M=0.4677$, $SD=0.49977$) and males ($M=0.3567$, $SD=0.48055$), $t(324.544)=2.328$, $p=0.21$, Mean difference 0.11, 95% CI: 0.02 to 0.20 eta square=0.012, meaning that the gender difference explains only 1.2% of the variance of factor I-6; I-9 between females ($M=0.5290$, $SD=0.49996$) and males ($M=0.4013$, $SD=0.49172$), $t(318.094)=2.637$, $p=0.09$, Mean difference 0.13, 95% CI: 0.03 to 0.22, eta square=0.015, meaning that the gender difference explains only 1.5% of the variance of factor I-9. The results of the parametric technique t-test indicated existing small statistically significant differences in the thinking of female and male populations regarding the factors I-5, I-6, and I-9 that influence the interest of tourists in the state-supported countryside walking tourism, confirming the hypothesis H2. The mentioned factors are more important for females than for males. Based on these results, in the process of preparing policies for sustainable rural and tourism development, it is necessary to pay attention to the differences that exist between the female and male populations and create policies and programs “tailored” to the needs of the user groups.

The research showed the existence of significant differences in the perception of the factors of state-supported countryside walking tourism and their influence on the interest of tourists by the following grouping variables: age, marital status, number of children, education, work status, and annual personal investment for tourist travel and vacation (Table 7).

Table 7. Kruskal – Wallis test results

Factors of state-supported countryside walking tourism on the interest of tourists	I-1	I-2	I-3	I-4	I-5	I-6	I-7	I-8	I-9
<i>Grouping Variable: Age</i>									
Chi-Square	8,522	12,779	3,216	6,226	1,951	4,954	7,164	9,935	5,262
df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	,074	,012	,522	,183	,745	,292	,127	,042	,261
<i>Grouping Variable: Marital status</i>									
Chi-Square	4,991	2,000	4,705	6,998	10,210	6,834	,378	5,093	2,693
df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	,288	,736	,319	,136	,037	,145	,984	,278	,610
<i>Grouping Variable: Number of children</i>									
Chi-Square	14,220	3,114	3,926	2,309	,591	3,546	5,918	3,314	7,257
df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	,007	,539	,416	,679	,964	,471	,205	,507	,123
<i>Grouping Variable: Education</i>									
Chi-Square	,616	2,557	2,420	4,099	3,121	5,885	5,751	2,795	12,629
df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	,961	,634	,659	,393	,538	,208	,219	,593	,013
<i>Grouping Variable: Work status</i>									
Chi-Square	4,385	6,732	5,065	2,079	1,012	7,997	2,449	8,529	3,981
df	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Asymp. Sig.	,495	,241	,408	,838	,962	,156	,784	,129	,552

Factors of state-supported countryside walking tourism on the interest of tourists	I-1	I-2	I-3	I-4	I-5	I-6	I-7	I-8	I-9
<i>Grouping Variable: Annual personal investment for tourist travel and vacation</i>									
Chi-Square	2,899	,752	,106	,815	4,927	,262	3,182	2,620	2,622
df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	,235	,687	,948	,665	,085	,877	,204	,270	,269

Source: Authors' calculations

Using the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, there were statistically significant differences regarding the following factors:

- I-2 between the *age groups* (≤ 25 , $n=82$, $26-35$ $n=54$, $36-45$ $n=119$, $46-55$ $n=128$, ≥ 56 $n=84$), $c^2(2, n=467)=12,779$, $p=0,012$, $Md=0$; regarding the mean values of group ranks, I-2 was at the highest level in the *26-35 age group*, and at the lowest level in the *≥ 56 age group*;
- I-8 between the *age groups* (≤ 25 , $n=82$, $26-35$ $n=54$, $36-45$ $n=119$, $46-55$ $n=128$, ≥ 56 $n=84$), $c^2(2, n=467)=9,935$, $p=0,042$, for the *26-35 age group* $Md=1$, for other groups $Md=0$; regarding the mean values of group ranks, I-8 was at the highest level in the *26-35 age group*, and at the lowest level in the *≤ 25 age group*;
- I-5 between the *marital status groups* (single, $n=125$; cohabitation, $n=61$; married, $n=238$; divorced, $n=29$; widow/widower, $n=14$), $c^2(2, n=467)=10,210$, $p=0,037$, for the *divorced group* $Md=1$, for other groups $Md=0$; regarding the mean values of group ranks, I-5 was at the highest level in the *divorced group*, and at the lowest level in the *widow/widower group*;
- I-1 between the *number of children groups* (0, $n=182$; 1, $n=100$; 2, $n=142$; 3, $n=41$; ≥ 4 , $n=2$), $c^2(2, n=467)=14,220$, $p=0,007$; 0, 1 and ≥ 4 *number of children groups* had the equal median ($Md=1$), 2 and 3 *number of children groups* had the equal median ($Md=0$); regarding the mean values of group ranks, I-1 was at the highest level in the *≥ 4 number of children group*, and at the lowest level in the *2 number of children group*;
- I-9 between the *education groups* (without formal education, $n=2$; primary education, $n=3$; secondary education, $n=92$; college, $n=60$; university, $n=310$), $c^2(2, n=467)=12,629$, $p=0,013$; *without formal education and secondary education groups* had the equal median ($Md=0$), *primary education, college, and university groups* had the equal median ($Md=1$); regarding the mean values of group ranks, I-9 was at the highest level in the *primary education group*, and at the lowest level in the *without formal education group*.

There were no statistically significant differences regarding the following factors: I-3, I-4, I-6, and I-7. Statistically significant differences were observed for factors I-1, I-2, I-5, I-8,

and I-9 for all grouping variables except for the *work status group* and *annual personal investment for tourist travel and vacation groups*. Hypothesis H3 was not confirmed.

Conclusions

The countryside walking tourism foreseen by the policy of sustainable rural and tourism development of the country would primarily contribute to the interest of tourists due to safety, content, price, better meeting the needs of urban residents for outdoor activities, as well as environmental protection. In addition, for females, the state-supported countryside walking tourism would influence the interests of tourists because of the authentic gastronomy, traditional products, the inclusion of the local population, and the well-being of urban residents. Females have a greater need for the development of countryside walking tourism. In general, tourists prefer to choose an authentic local house and cuisine, as well as a local tour guide, and look at a village as the epicenter of countryside walking tourism.

The global recognition of the destination and the organization of family trips and children's stays in the countryside and nature are highly important among the age group from 26 to 35 years. The possibility of consuming authentic gastronomy, wine, souvenirs, textile items footwear, etc. is more significant for those who are divorced, while the safer stay, better content, and more affordable prices are the favorite interest of people with four and more children. For people with primary education, the need of urban residents for a light pace of life, outdoor physical activity, and leisure contributes to the development of rural tourism, which is the most important aspect of countryside walking tourism in the country's sustainable development strategy that strongly influences the interest of potential tourists.

Given that the validity of the sample was not examined, the authors point out that the results of this research should not be generalized but used for further research. This research is the beginning of gaining in-depth knowledge on this issue and it will be continued by researching the impact of people's interest in healthy and active life on the development of countryside walking tourism, by developing a cluster-based concept of management, funding, promotion, and internationalization of countryside walking tourism. Embedding countryside walking tourism in sustainable rural tourism development policies is recommended. The research contributes to the integration of sustainable rural development and sustainable tourism development.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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