
GASTRONOMY AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR RURAL PROSPERITY – EVIDENCE FROM RURAL SETTLEMENTS IN REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Food and gastronomy certainly occupy a special position in rural promotion. The aim of the research was to determine to what extent the local population believes that the gastronomic offer affects rural prosperity. The results show that all the factors of the tourist offer are of satisfactory quality and have a significant influence in predicting the rural development of countryside in Serbia, and that respondents in the middle age category believe that gastronomy determines rural prosperity. Material status has no statistical significance in the difference in the perception of the impact of gastronomy on rural development, but in relation to the age category, results show a statistically significant difference. The research has an obvious importance in the theoretical and applied aspect, as a complement to the existing literature, as well as an aid in the strategic planning of the development of rural settlements in Serbia.

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Introduction

When considering the term rural environment, there are difficulties in choosing the definition itself and determining what the term rural environment actually means. Certainly, the rural territory is the one where the space is used primarily for the production of food, but if viewed from a sociological point of view, it is a space that is at a lower level of development compared to the technological and cultural development in the urban environment (Gajić et al., 2022c). The Republic of Serbia is said to be a rural country, due to the huge rural areas it possesses, but also a large number of natural resources outside urban areas. The connection between tourism and rural development has been studied from many aspects for many years (Vukolić et al., 2022). Tourism is becoming traditionally linked to rural development, and all tourist activities, including gastronomy, are considered an economic addition to rural areas. As a kind of medicine for the recovery of rural areas, tourism and gastronomy are placed in the first place as its important segment.

The main goal of this research is to determine whether gastronomy, together with other tourist offers, is a good tool for improving rural areas. In this connection, two research questions were asked, which will receive their answer along with the confirmation of the corresponding hypotheses.

R.Q.1 - Is the quality of the entire tourist offer at a satisfactory level?

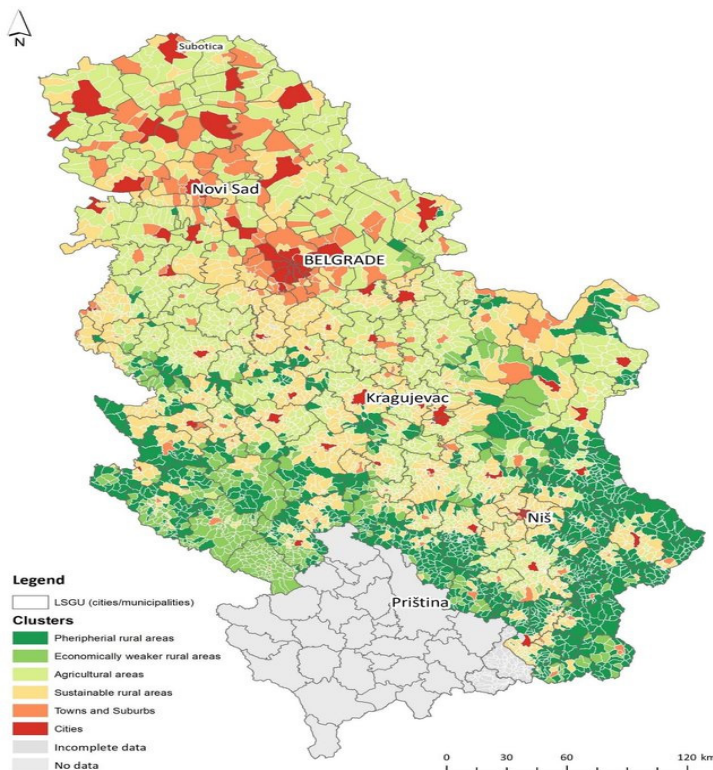
R.Q.2 - Can specific rural gastronomy contribute to rural prosperity?

In order to achieve this goal, research was conducted on a total sample of 534 respondents in 10 rural municipalities on the territory of Serbia. The research was conducted in the period from April to July 2022, by distributing a standard questionnaire to the local population in the given rural municipalities. SPSS software, version 26.00, was used for data analysis. Then, with the help of factor analysis items, a total of 6 factors were obtained, and multiple regression analysis determined whether there is an influence of factors on rural prosperity. The obtained results showed that each of the mentioned factors statistically significantly predicts rural prosperity, as well as that material status or monthly earnings do not show a statistical difference in the perception of the impact of gastronomy on rural development. Survey participants in the age group of 30 to 65 years, to the greatest extent believe that specific rural gastronomy will have an impact on rural property. There were certain limiting circumstances during the field research, primarily when surveying the local village population. A large number of them did not want to cooperate with the researchers because of the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still present. The research has wider social, economic and scientific significance, both in supplementing the existing literature, which is evidently scarce for this topic in Serbia, and also in supplementing strategic measures for the improvement of tourism business, which is an important segment of the development of rural settlements in Serbia.

Literature review

Republic of Serbia has always been rich in natural resources, and the villages of Serbia are considered a potential tourist offer, precisely because of the very weak offer on the tourist market (Božović et al., 2021). Rural settlements become an attractor for tourists, especially in conditions when there was a pandemic, and the local population was looking for a place to escape from urban areas, and to avoid closure during the restrictive measures that had to be observed in certain periods of the previous two and a half years (Blešić et al., 2022). However, foreign tourists are also looking for vacations in rural areas, especially those that are poorly explored and have different natural beauty than what has already been seen in Europe and the world (Kirolova and Hamarneh, 2017; Lakićević et al., 2023). Therefore, Serbia has a huge potential for the future of tourism development, primarily by offering untouched rural areas, where, in addition to enjoying nature, tourists can get to know the tradition, culture, history of the Serbian people and all minorities in this area, but also participate in rural activities provided by rural households (Gajić et al., 2022a,c,d). Rural development is seen as a process of improvement of all sectors from economic to social well-being of rural settlements (Alonso et al., 2017).

Figure 1. Map of rural areas on the territory of Serbia

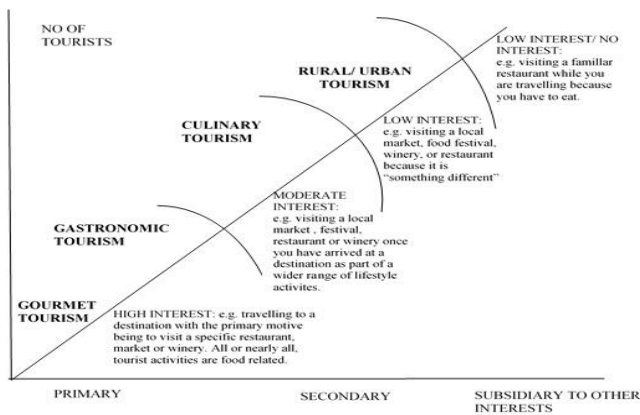


Source: Gajić et al., 2021.

Rural development includes a set of local culture and heritage that includes gastronomy, then old crafts, traditional art, village history, landscapes and related flora and fauna (Lee et al., 2016). Focusing on the offered gastronomy is a unique opportunity to explore the production potential and limitations of the current tourist offer in the rural areas of Serbia (Blešić et al., 2022).

Gastronomy is one of the elements incorporated into the new concept of development of tourism and public spaces, relying on the growing trends of a good lifestyle, authenticity, environmental protection and the need for a quality experience (Dougherty and Green, 2011). The need among tourists for food that reflects the heritage and culture of the place, which helps preserve traditional forms of agriculture and cultural heritage, is emphasized (Mak et al., 2012; Richards, 2015). In this context, gastronomy represents a major link in the relationship between tourism and rural development (Cohen and Arieli, 2004). The national cuisine of Serbia is certainly a form of cultural tourism and heritage (Gajić et al., 2022b). Food can be a great attractor when it comes to areas that are dying, such as rural areas. Food is used as a medium of interaction and cultural identity (Mitchell et al., 2012). Today, gastronomic tourism has become an important aspect of tourism to attract international tourists and many destinations use food as a source of attraction in their tourism marketing to differentiate and expand their market base (Lin et al., 2011). Not only is food a necessity, but also on the basis of tourism, it becomes a motivation for tourism (Prada – Trigo, 2017). As gastronomy is an essential part of travel it plays an important role in the visitor experience which helps to enhance the tourism experience, more than just as food (Sedarati, 2012). According to Quan & Wang (2004) gastronomy refers to the recognition of various factors relevant to the food and drink that a group eats and consumes in a place, region or even nation. Food is an essential part of all cultures and one of the elements of creativity in everyday life that is interesting for many visitors (Sims, 2009). Food is also an element that is easily associated with the tourism industry and contributes to economic development and improving the national image (Koloman and Koloman, 2014).

Figure 2. Food tourism as special interest tourism



Source: taken from Hall & Sharples (2003)

Gastronomy, as a tourist resource, is valued not only for its own sake, but also for its ability to generate rural development (McKercher, 2008). Gastronomic tourism helps to increase rural sources of income and improve income levels and employment of the local workforce (especially women) (Williams et al., 2014).

In relation to the problem of the research, the following hypotheses were set:

H1: The quality of factors of the tourist offer are at a satisfactory level.

H2a: Accommodation has impact on rural prosperity.

H2b: Specific rural gastronomy has impact on rural prosperity.

H2c: Intermediaries has impact on rural prosperity.

H2d: Environment and region have impact on rural prosperity.

H2e: Complementary activities have impact on rural prosperity

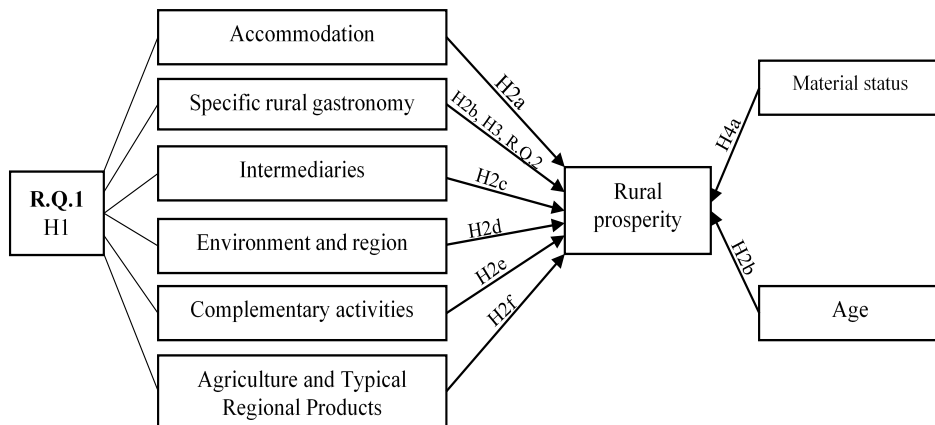
H2f: Agriculture and Typical Regional Products have impact on rural prosperity.

H3: Specific rural gastronomy has the greatest influence on rural prosperity

H4a: Material status shows a statistically significant difference in the perception of the influence of gastronomy on the development of rural settlements

H4b: Age shows a statistically significant difference in the perception of the influence of gastronomy on the development of rural settlements

Figure 3. Hypothesis setting



Source: author's research

Methodology

Sample and procedure

The research was carried out in the period from April to July 2022, using the standard procedure of distributing questionnaires among the local population in 10 rural settlements in Serbia: Lopatnica, Rogljevo, Turija, Ključ, Leušići, Gornja Koviljača, Drežnik, Knić, Tulež, Kremna. The total number of respondents was 534. The questions were asked in Serbian, but the questionnaire was retranslated into English to ensure the original meaning of the questions.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics and travel habits of respondents

Gender (%)			Education (%)	
<i>Male</i>	53.7%		<i>Elementary school</i>	11.8 %
<i>Female</i>	47.3%		<i>Secondary school</i>	30.8%
			<i>Higher school/college</i>	52.9%
Age (%)	<35	30.4	<i>Faculty/master/PhD</i>	4.5%
	35-65	37.6%		
	65+	32%		
Material status (euro)				
	300-500	500-1.000	>1.000	
	54.3%	32.7%	13%	

Source: author's research

A total of 53% of men and 47.3% of women participated in the research. The largest percentage of respondents is between the ages of 35 and 65 (37.6%), followed by a total of 32% aged over 65 and 30.4% under 35. A total of 11.8% have completed elementary school, followed by 30.8% with completed secondary school. In total, 52.9% of respondents with a college degree and 4.5% with a university degree participated, where both respondents with MSc and PhD degrees were included. When looking at the non-material statistics, the majority of research participants had an average income of 300 to 500 euros (54.3%), followed by 32.7% with an average of between 500 and 1,000 euros and only 13% with earnings over 1,000 euros.

The data used in the research analysis were collected by a questionnaire that consisted of 20 questions, which consisted of two parts. The first group of questions consisted of questions related to the sociodemographic structure of the respondents (age, gender, education, material status). The second part of the questionnaire contained questions related to all factors that will be given in the following paragraphs. Answers were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1-I totally disagree, 5 - I totally agree).

Measures

The model established by the author Güzel (2016) was used, with certain modifications of the questions from the given questionnaire. A total of 6 factors were determined with a very good reliability value for all items (α): A - Accommodation (Hotels $\alpha=0.734$, Rural households $\alpha=0.893$, Rural camps $\alpha=0.870$, Hostels $\alpha=0.894$), SP- Specific rural gastronomy (Food $\alpha=0.850$, Drink $\alpha=0.820$, Domestic products $\alpha=0.844$), I - Intermediaries (Tourist agencies $\alpha=0.889$, Social medias $\alpha=0.800$), ER -Environment and Region (Natural resources $\alpha=0.738$, Cultural resources $\alpha=0.780$, Social resources $\alpha=0.710$), CA - Complementary Activities (Domestic workshops $\alpha=0.690$, Entertainment $\alpha=0.690$, Events $\alpha=0.789$, Recreation and sports $\alpha=0.822$), ATRP - Agriculture and Typical Regional Products (Alimentary Firms and Production Zones $\alpha=0.890$, Wine Producers and Vineyards $\alpha=0.849$), RP – Rural prosperity (Gastronomy affects the complete rural development $\alpha=0.769$, Gastronomy contributes only to the promotion of domestic products $\alpha=0.791$).

Data analysis

The obtained data were processed with SPSS software, version 26.00. Given the fact that all values are normally distributed, data processing was started through parametric analysis (Sk and Ku values ranged from -1.5 to 1.5). Descriptive statistical analysis was used to obtain average grades and values of arithmetic averages for each item. Then, exploratory factor analysis confirmed the number of factors and the percentage of explained variance, more precisely EFA was applied as a principal component analysis to check the factor structure. Representativeness was good (KMO = .914), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(66) = 6272.792$, $p < .000$), which confirmed that the data were suitable for further analysis.

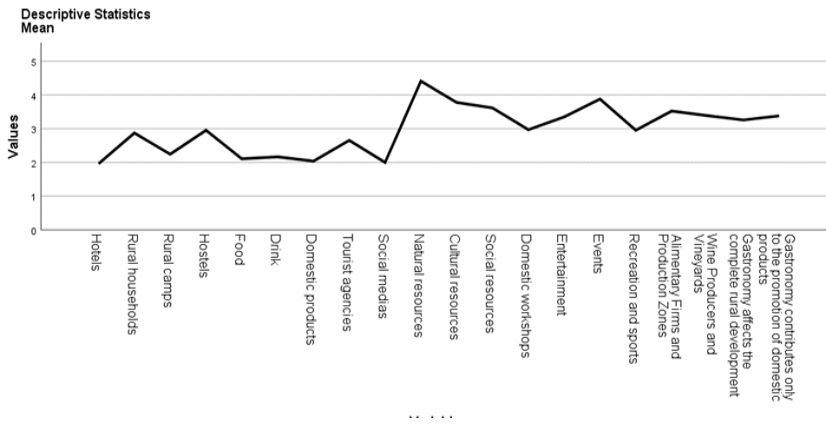
The problem of determining the influence of factors on the criterion variable Rural prosperity is a problem of one dependent and several independent variables, with a linear relationship, and the case is reduced to a multiple regression model. Also, in order to find out the differences in the perception of the impact of gastronomy on rural prosperity, in relation to age and material status, the authors used an analysis of variance - ANOVA.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistical analysis

Figure 4. gives an insight into the average scores for all questions that are later grouped into 6 factors.

Figure 4. Display of average marks for all questions



Source: author's research

It is noted that the items belonging to the Environment and Region factor, which includes natural, cultural and social resources, received the highest marks. Elements belonging to factor 1 Accomodations received the lowest marks. Items that belong to the factor of influence of gastronomy on rural development have an average score above 3. The item Social media, which belongs to factor 3 - Intermediaries, received the lowest average score below 2. The initial hypothesis H1, that all factors of the quality of the tourist offer are at a satisfactory level, was confirmed. The obtained results provide an answer to the first research question of R.Q. 1 that the quality of the offer is at a satisfactory level.

Factor extraction

Given that all model fit parameters were adequate (KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity), a further EFA analysis was undertaken. Factor analysis confirmed that all items are grouped into 6 factors, with an explained variance of 73.3%. Promax rotation was applied since the extracted components were correlated. Horn's parallel analysis confirmed the acceptance of 6 factors (Horn, 1965). The first factor has the highest percentage of saturation and explains the highest percentage of variance, 41.2%, while the other factors explain slightly less percentage of variance, going towards the last one, which explains 3.8%. The factor structure matches the number of factors from the model taken from the author Güzel (2016).

Table 2. Results of factor extraction – EFA analysis

Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a
% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
41.219	41.219	6.588
11.706	52.926	5.407
6.994	59.920	5.527

Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a
5.591	65.510	4.017
3.981	69.492	1.023
3.864	73.355	1.224

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

^aWhen components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

Source: author's research

Results of multiple regression analysis

According to the obtained results of the multiple regression analysis, it was determined that the percentage of the variable explained by the model was 61.7% ($R^2 = 61.7\%$, $F=141.349$, $df=6$, $p=0.00$). Table 3 shows the data of the multiple regression analysis, where the significance of the influence of all factors on rural development is observed. It is observed that all the mentioned factors show a statistically significant influence on the prediction of rural development. The value of b is for each factor in a positive direction, which means that they have an influence on the prediction in the same direction (the more significant the factor, the more significant the prediction).

Table 3. Regression model - presentation of the influence of factors on rural development

Model	B	Std.Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-.259	.181		-1.433	.153
Accommodation	.063	.076	.035	.828	.008
Specific gastronomy	.020	.067	.012	.303	.042
Intermediaries	.096	.058	.061	1.642	.001
Environment and region	.128	.050	.092	2.558	.011
Complementary activities	.209	.045	.198	4.670	.000
Agriculture and Typical Regional Products	.569	.038	.537	15.059	.000

Criterion variable: Rural prosperity

Source: author's research

These results confirmed the hypotheses: H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d, H2e and H2f, that all factors have an impact on rural prosperity. Also, it was established that specific rural gastronomy affects rural prosperity, but not to the greatest extent, and hypothesis H3 is partially explained.

Determining differences in the perception of the impact of gastronomy on rural prosperity – ANOVA

With the help of analysis of variance, it was determined whether there are differences in the opinions of respondents about the impact of gastronomy on rural prosperity in relation to demographic characteristics, age and financial status (Table 5).

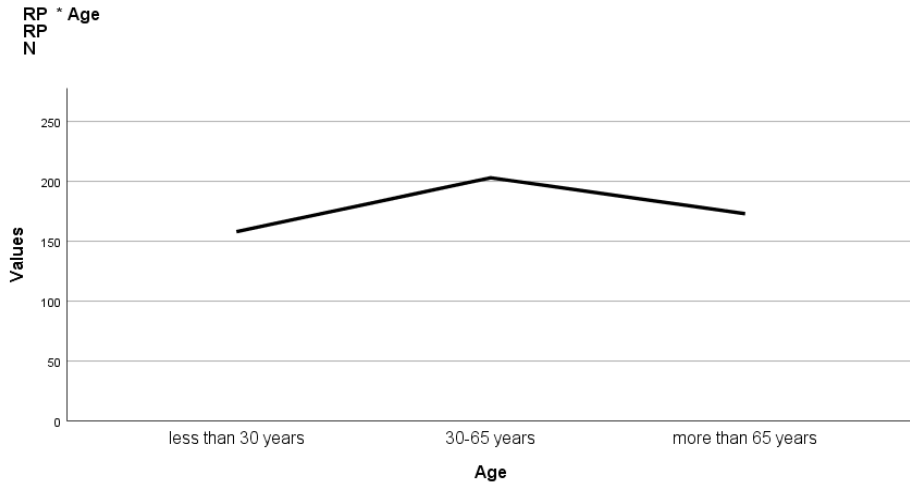
Table 5. Results of analysis of variance

(I) M.status	(J) M.status	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Low	Average	3.24411*	.063	.0724	6.4158
	High	2.82308	.106	-.3902	6.0363
Average	Low	-3.24411*	.063	-6.4158	-.0724
	High	-.42103	.266	-1.0136	.1715
High	Low	-2.82308	.106	-6.0363	.3902
	Average	.42103	.266	-.1715	1.0136
(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
Less than 30 years	30-65 years	-.53850*	.018	-1.0083	-.0687
	More than 65 years	.31057	.379	-.1767	.7978
30-65 years	Less than 30 years	.53850*	.018	.0687	1.0083
	More than 65 years	.84907*	.000	.3909	1.3072
More than 65 years	Less than 30 years	-.31057	.379	-.7978	.1767
	30-65 years	-.84907*	.000	-1.3072	-.3909

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Source: author's research

The ANOVA test showed that there are statistically significant differences in the answers about the influence of gastronomy on rural prosperity in relation to the demographic categories of the year and material status. The values of the test for material status are: $df=2$, $F=4.380$, $p=0.73$, and for the age category: $df=2$, $F=10.262$, $p=0.000$. Table I on the graph shows that material status does not affect the respondents' perception of the importance of gastronomy on rural prosperity. Hypothesis H4a was negated, and hypothesis H4b was confirmed due to the perceived value of the existing differences in the answers in the category of age or years. Respondents between the ages of 30 and 65 emphasize differences in the perception of the impact of gastronomy on rural prosperity in comparison to other age groups of respondents. The accuracy of the established differences in the focus category is shown in figure 5.

Figure 5. Display of differences in response in relation to age

Source: author's research

Conclusion with limitations and future implications

The increasing demand of modern tourists for rural areas, local tradition and culture, as well as the desire for community involvement provides opportunities for the economic revitalization of rural areas (Alonso et al., 2017). Gastronomy can be the driving force behind the sustainable economy of rural areas and social inclusion in the overall economic development (Gajić et al., 2022a). In many rural settlements, incomes from the cultivation of agricultural crops are decreasing, so the contribution to the development of those areas would definitely be tourism in any form, including gastronomic tourism (Cvijanović et al., 2022). The traditional way of life as well as natural resources are certainly threatened, but it is necessary to take measures in order to place them in the right position of promotion on the tourist market, and to strengthen the entire economy of rural areas (Richards, 2015).

The aim of the research was to determine whether gastronomy affects the rural prosperity of rural settlements in Serbia. The data were collected through a random survey in 10 rural municipalities in Serbia, on a total sample of 524 respondents. The obtained data were processed in SPSS version 26.00 software. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the highest average rating of the quality of the tourist offer was given to issues related to the Environment and the region, while the item related to social media, which belongs to the Intermediaries factor, had the lowest rating. The results of a confirmed the first hypothesis H1 that the quality of the supply factor is at a satisfactory level, and also provided an answer to the research question R.Q.1 related to the quality of the service. Exactly six factors were obtained by exploratory factor analysis (EFA), where all issues related to the quality of the complete tourist offer

were grouped. After that, multiple regression analysis found that each of the factors has a significant impact on rural prosperity, thus confirming the hypotheses H2a - H2f, because it was shown that it is not only specific gastronomy that has an impact on rural development. Hypothesis H3 is partially confirmed. Research question R.Q.2 receives an affirmative answer that gastronomy affects rural prosperity. Analysis of variance showed that material status does not show a statistically significant difference in the perception of the impact of gastronomy on rural development (H4a negated), while age shows a statistically significant difference (H4b confirmed).

There were limiting circumstances during the investigation. During the field research, the poor cooperation of the local population with the researchers was revealed, on the one hand due to the unknown about the research and on the other hand due to the pandemic which is still present in people's consciousness. Also, limiting circumstances also concern theoretical aspects, because there is not much research on this topic. A lot is written about rural tourism, but there is not much research on the impact of gastronomy on rural development for the area of Serbia. Certainly, this research with its data will contribute to the development of the theory, but also the possible application of the data in some subsequent researches in the territory of Serbia. Also, the report from the field and the data can be used to assess the current state of rural development and devise a strategy for marketing rural areas and traditional gastronomy to the tourist market, which would have a positive impact on the economy of rural settlements, but also on greater employment and the return of youth to those regions.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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