GASTRONOMY TOURISM AND THE PERCEIVED IMAGE OF SERBIAN NATIONAL CUISINE: STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING OF THE MAIN DETERMINANTS

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A B S T R A C T

Positioning and differentiation of Serbian cuisine among other ethnic cuisines can be the means to include Serbian gastronomy in heritage and cultural tourism. This paper's significance lies in its comparative analysis, specifically examining the impacts of taste and quality of food, food service quality, and the authenticity of national food. The goal is to identify the primary factors influencing the perceived image of Serbian national cuisine, ultimately leading to the successful development of gastronomic offerings. The research was conducted on a sample of 217 respondents. Data were collected using the survey method. Respondents expressed their level of agreement with questionnaire items on a seven-point Likert scale. Reliability, validity, and model fit were assessed in the data analysis. A structural equation modeling was used to test causal relations between the latent variables. The research results emphasize the taste and quality of food as the main driver of the perceived image of national cuisine.

Introduction

Tourist preferences are evolving globally, with a growing emphasis on unique experiences. Modern tourists no longer limit their interests to visiting cultural, historical,

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and natural landmarks; instead, they are increasingly seeking to explore destinations through additional elements, such as gastronomy (Dimitrovski, 2016). In recent times, numerous destinations have been marketing themselves as gastronomic hubs, whether situated in rural or urban settings. However, there has been a lack of focused attention on comprehending the specific products, attractions, and experiences desired by tourists (Kivela & Crotts, 2009; Tikkanen, 2007).

Over the centuries, the role of food has transcended mere sustenance, evolving into a cultural and ethnic identifier. It serves as a constant reminder of an individual's background, reflecting who they are in a cultural context. Research supports the idea that ethnic cuisine serves as a reflection of national customs and culture (Edles, 2004; Okumus, Okumus, Mckercher, 2007; Henderson, 2014).

Ethnic restaurants can be defined as establishments primarily focused on offering the cuisine and dishes of a specific country or region, accompanied by an authentic dining setting that includes physical artifacts representative of that location (Jang, Ha and Park, 2012). Visiting an ethnic restaurant that authentically serves the cuisine of a particular country or region transforms these establishments into platforms for experiencing different cultures, often fostering the development of gastronomy tourism. Literature indicates that the ethnic ambience and authenticity of a restaurant play vital roles in generating customer satisfaction (Gaytàn, 2008). Increased satisfaction of customers or tourists with ethnic food and restaurants enhances the potential for successful development of a country's gastronomy tourism.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to investigate the primary factors influencing the perceived image of national cuisine. By doing so, it offers valuable insights for decision-makers to gain a deeper understanding of customer needs, particularly in comprehending the specific products, attractions, and experiences desired by tourists. The aim is to provide guidance for the successful development of gastronomy tourism.

The study adds to the current body of literature by employing a quantitative field approach to investigate the drivers of the perceived image of national cuisine – a topic that has been explored in only a limited number of studies so far. The significance of this paper lies in its comparative analysis, specifically examining the impacts of food taste, the authenticity of national specialties, and service quality on the perceived image.

Literature overview

Gastronomy tourism as a part of national heritage

As a fundamental human necessity and a captivating aspect of tourist appeal, gastronomy significantly enhances the allure of a destination. Serbian cuisine, in particular, stands out as one of the most favorable elements contributing to the region's tourism image. This study aims to investigate the locals' perception of gastronomic specificity of Serbian national (local) food and to investigate how Serbian food is perceived in terms of its tourist potential, authenticity, quality, taste, nutrition, food service quality, and its general role in the creation of a Serbian tourist brand (Jovičić, Vuković and Terzić, 2020).

Serbia's advantageous geo-strategic position in the broader region, coupled with available natural resources, a unique and diverse agro-biodiversity, and a longstanding tradition in well-known high-quality food, present excellent potential for developing a variety of added value opportunities such as: geographical indication (GI) products, organic agriculture etc. (Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group – SWG, 2020). These products could serve as catalysts for the advancement of the agricultural sector and rural areas in Serbia through ethno-tourism (Kovačević, Brenjo, Cvetković and Rainović, 2022).

The importance of quality of Serbian gastronomic offer stems from the structure of agricultural production in Serbia, namely, small, fragmented, economically weak and mostly unorganized agricultural farms which cannot claim their competitive advantage in the economy of scale – the average agricultural plot per farm is 6.2 hectares, approximately one-third of the EU27 average which is 14.5 hectares (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management Republic of Serbia and IPARD EU4 Rural Areas, 2022). By producing large quantities of standard quality products, they cannot gain competitive advantage, therefore, the way to improving competitiveness of Serbian agriculture, especially in hilly and mountainous areas, lies in the production of high-quality agricultural products (Zrnić, Gajić & Vukolić, 2022).

Gastronomy drives the tourism with the aim to strategically integrating culinary heritage into the tourism offering of the country (Kukanja and Peštek, 2020). Countries need to develop a comprehensive gastronomic tourism development plan, citing its potential to contribute to sustainable development goals, stimulate economic growth, create employment opportunities, and boost the income of those involved in the food industry (Tovmasyan, 2019). To cater for the preferences of tourists, the text underscores the importance of research to understand consumer motivations and behaviors, which can then inform the creation of targeted gastronomic tourism products. Furthermore, the significance of educational institutions in producing highly qualified professionals for the gastronomy sector is crucial by recognizing their role in influencing service quality and, consequently, customer satisfaction.

The significance of food in advancing tourism services cannot be overstated, given that it frequently constitutes 30% or more of tourist spending. Spain has emerged as a premier gastronomic destination by fostering regional culinary diversity and offering top-notch food experiences. Italy has a highly developed gastronomic landscape (Schmitt, Galli, Menozzi, Maye, Touzard, Marescotti, Six and Brunori, 2017). French Sopexa has established itself as a leading agency in global marketing, with a specialization in food, wine, and lifestyle. With over 50 years of experience, Sopexa has been instrumental in enhancing the reputation of the French agrifood sector and promoting France as a premier gastronomic destination. In Latin America, culinary heritage is now being recognized as a potential area for the development of sustainable tourism, which can be particularly important in generating income for local communities (OECD, 2012).

For the Republic of Serbia to become one of the leading gastronomic destinations in the Balkan region, improvement and promotion of added value production with the positive impact on improving the export structure is of utmost importance. Although agriculture is one of the few economic branches that constantly records a surplus in foreign trade, the structure of this exchange is unfavorable because cheap processed products are imported, while fresh unprocessed products dominate foreign exports (Grujic-Vuckovski, and Kovacevic, 2020). Furthermore, the development of gastronomy and related ethno-tourism enables the necessary diversification of income in urban and rural areas with the accent on the preservation of villages and the prevention of depopulation of those areas (Vuković, et al, 2021, Kovačević et. Al, 2021). Tracing the path to added value products has a positive effect on the preservation of the environment, considering that the production of traditional products is connected with traditional eco-friendly production methods.

To accomplish the objectives of cultivating a culture of nutritious eating and endorsing the high-quality food originating from Serbia, it is imperative to involve targeted ministries, food producers and distributors, tourism entities, as well as health and educational institutions. The objectives include establishing a culture of consuming nutritious and high-quality Serbian food, distinguishing and positioning Serbian cuisine from other ethnic cuisines in the region, boosting the production and consumption of Serbian food, and attracting a higher number of tourists (Vukolić, Gajić and Bugarčić, 2021).

Socio-cultural shifts, including changes in lifestyles and values, play a pivotal role in shaping food consumption patterns, delineating three significant trends in food preferences. The initial trend involves the gradual substitution of traditional homemade dishes crafted from fresh ingredients with processed, industrially manufactured food alternatives. The second trend is related to the disappearance of the seasonal cycle in food consumption, and the third is a trend towards "exotic" ethnic food (Verbeke and Lopez, 2005).

Consumers encounter novel ethnic cuisines as a result of globalization, the ever-expanding international trade, integrated marketing communications (particularly advertising), travel (including tourism and migration), as well as the presence of diverse stores and restaurants. Factors that provoke the growing demand for ethnic foods are: demographic changes, television shows about food, the Internet, a new ethnic restaurant chain (Duff, 2005). The increasing desire for ethnic cuisine stems from the growing demand for healthier options and a curiosity to explore different, flavors.

The convenience-oriented lifestyle and purchasing power of consumers, particularly in developed nations, result in a rising trend of dining out or utilizing catering services, thereby increasing exposure to a wider range of food options. The desire for both healthier and more flavorful cuisine stands as a significant factor driving the growth of ethnic food consumption.

To effectively position Serbian cuisine necessitates a clear definition of the concept of Serbian food, specifically identifying what constitutes Serbian cuisine. Considering global trends favoring healthier food options, the emphasis should shift towards

traditional "antique" Serbian food, beverages, and dishes rooted in nutritious, high-quality ingredients and preparation methods. To distinguish Serbian food, it should stand out from familiar and widely accepted culinary offerings. The comprehensive involvement of diverse stakeholders, guided by the defined concept of Serbian food, is vital in cultivating a positive image for Serbian national cuisine.

Traditional Serbian cuisine – positioning and differentiation

Understanding the perceived image of Serbian national cuisine is the key for positioning and differentiating traditional Serbian cuisine and highlighting specific regions within the Republic of Serbia and their unique products. By leveraging these products, tourism promotion can be enhanced and each region can be effectively presented, both in domestic and foreign markets.

Aforementioned can be done on the basis of: the attributes (taste and authenticity) and quality of healthy food, the benefits, food service quality, the group users and by comparing to foreign competitors e.g., highlighting local natural ingredients (Kovačić, Pivac, Akkar Ercan, Kimić, Ivanova-Radovanova, Gorica, and Tolica, 2023). Involvement of celebrities and/or experts in various fields who eat healthy food through social networks and other media channels can add additional value to the visibility and the perceived image of Serbian national cuisine (Vukolić, Gajić and Penić, 2022).

The strategy for positioning Serbian food involves a comprehensive approach to promote healthy eating on multiple fronts. The primary focus is on instilling a culture of consuming locally-produced, nutritious food in Serbia. Educational initiatives are essential, targeting institutes, schools, and universities to underscore the health and economic advantages of choosing healthy Serbian food. Concurrently, efforts are geared towards establishing a positive image of Serbian food, both domestically and internationally, with key responsibilities assigned to ministries, institutes, media, and other relevant organizations (Dogan and Petkovic, 2016).

Enhancing the favorable perception of Serbian national cuisine involves manufacturing and advertising top-tier traditional foods from diverse regions across Serbia, accentuating not just the culinary delights but also their regional origins. Recognizing the visual influence on food choices, there is an emphasis on attractive packaging. However, it is crucial that the product's quality matches the appeal of the packaging for sustained success. In essence, this holistic approach acknowledges the interconnection of education, perception, product quality, and presentation in fostering a thriving culture of healthy Serbian food consumption (Kovačić, et al., 2023).

Factors influencing the perceived image of Serbian national cuisine

The perceived authenticity of regional foods is shaped by various factors (Gagić, Jovičić, Tešanović and Kalenjuk, 2014). Firstly, personal elements such as knowledge and experience play a crucial role. Then come the product-related factors, including product features, branding and positioning, or design and packaging. Additionally,

factors referring to the conditions, circumstances, or context, like where the product is purchased or consumed, also contribute to shaping the perception of authenticity. It is a blend of personal insights, product characteristics, and the context in which the food is encountered (Verbeke, Pieniak, Guerrero and Hersleth, 2012).

Organizations can impact these factors through strategies such as informing and influencing potential consumers, and advocating the significance of consuming healthy local foods, by organizing tasting promotions and fostering positive experiences. This involves using distinctive names, appealing design of packaging, and comprehensive ingredient descriptions, while also ensuring widespread products distribution and their availability in retail outlets, hotels, restaurants, and cafés. In essence, the organization becomes a key player in shaping perceptions by actively engaging with consumers, optimizing product characteristics, and strategically placing products in the market (Vuksanović and Demirović Bajrami, 2020).

Strategically incorporating Serbian cuisine into spa tourism, countryside or pilgrimage tourism should be a direction of action. With the growing appreciation of physical activity, tourists are particularly redirected towards wellness spa tourism. Spas are further positioned and differentiated based on their spa menu, which could be crafted around healthy Serbian food. Promotion of healthy diet option in spas encourage local tourists to continue consuming healthy food at home. This practice may also spur foreign tourists to opt for healthy Serbian foods.

With an increasing number of tourists visiting villages, collaboration between food producers, local tourist organizations, and households becomes crucial in shaping a culture of gastro-tourism and healthy eating with Serbian food at its core.

Materials and methods

The study focuses on main determinants of the perceived Serbian national cuisine image. In this context, the new research model, which includes three potential drivers of image: taste and quality, authenticity, and the quality of service, was proposed. The paper determines which of the said variables creates the image of Serbian national cuisine to the greatest extent.

The sample for this research included 217 fans of Serbian national food, who were asked to evaluate national specialties presented at a Serbian gastronomic festival. The ratio of female and male respondents was 43.8% women against 56.2% of men. The respondents up to 30 years of age constituted 59.4% of the sample. As for their education level, 65.4% of respondents had primary or secondary school diploma. On the other hand, respondents with a higher education made up 34.6% of the sample.

Data were collected using the survey method. Using this method, a large sample of respondents can be included, and the collected data are suitable for carrying out quantitative analysis. Each variable within the model was assessed using multiple items crafted after reviewing pertinent literature. Participants indicated their level of agreement

with these items using a seven-point Likert scale. Food taste and quality statements were adapted from Dimitrovski (2016) and Updhyay and Sharma (2014). The national food authenticity statements were adapted from Mason and Paggiaro (2012). The study utilized criteria for assessing food service quality based on frameworks established by Wan and Chan (2013) and Updhyay and Sharma (2014). Based on the research conducted by Boo et al. (2009), we defined the items for measuring the perceived image of Serbian national cuisine.

Data were analyzed by the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS 20) and AMOS 18 software suite. First the constructs reliability was evaluates by examining the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. To test the model fit, several relevant fit indices were calculated (χ^2/df; GFI – Goodness of Fit Index; RFI – Relative Fit Index; NFI – Normed Fit Index; CFI – Comparative Goodness Of Fit; TLI – Tucker–Lewis Index; IFI – Incremental Fit Index; RMSEA – Root Mean Square Error of Approximation). Additionally, convergent and discriminant validity of the model and the composite reliability, were assessed. In the main part of the analysis, using structural equation modeling, the effects of food quality and taste, authenticity, and the quality of service on the perceived image of national cuisine were tested.

Results

Before testing the causal relations between the model constructs, the reliability, validity and fit of the model were assessed. When it comes to the reliability analysis, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for individual constructs (*Table 1*). All obtained values were higher than the desired threshold of 0.7, indicating an adequate level of internal consistency of the statements that were used for measuring the latent variables (Nunnally, 1978).

The model reasonably fitted the data. *Table 2* shows fit indices values. The data from the table indicate that the value of the ratio χ^2/df is lower than 3 (Dastane et al., 2023), the values of the GFI, NFI, RFI, CFI, TLI, and IFI indices are higher than 0.9 (Kaatz, 2020), while the RMSEA is below 0.08 (Hair et al., 2010).

The model fulfills the convergent validity according to the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, since for each latent variable the average variance extracted (AVE) is higher than the threshold of 0.5 (Taste and quality of food: 0.685; Authenticity of national food: 0.636; Food service quality: 0.746; Perceived image of national cuisine: 0.845). The AVE for all constructs surpassed the squared correlations between them, confirming discriminant validity. *Table 3* shows the results of the correlation analysis. In addition, for every single construct, composite reliability is higher than 0.6 (Taste and quality of food: 0.866; Authenticity of national food: 0.89; Food service quality: 0.898; Perceived image of national cuisine: 0.942).

Table 1. The analysis of reliability

Variables	Cronbach's alpha
Taste and quality of food	0.86
Authenticity of national food	0.83
Food service quality	0.89
Perceived image of national cuisine	0.94

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 2. The model – fit indices

Fit indices	Recommended value	Measurement model
χ^2 / df	< 3	2.30
GFI	> 0.9	0.923
NFI	> 0.9	0.946
RFI	> 0.9	0.926
CFI	> 0.9	0.969
TLI	> 0.9	0.957
IFI	> 0.9	0.969
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.078

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 3: Intercorrelation matrix

	1. Taste and quality of food	2. Authenticity of national food	3. Food service quality	4. Perceived image of national cuisine
1.	1	0.636	0.660	0.536
2.	0.636	1	0.739	0.521
3.	0.660	0.739	1	0.541
4.	0.536	0.521	0.541	1

Source: Authors' calculations

Following the evaluation of the model's reliability and validity, the statistical analysis then focused on testing the impacts of independent variables on the perceived image of national cuisine. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied using the maximum likelihood method (Fedajev et al., 2023; Yu and Huang, 2022; Chopdar and Balakrishnan, 2020). Two out of three tested effects were found to be statistically significant. *Table 4* lists the results.

Table 4. SEM analysis results

Relationship	β coefficient	Significance
Taste and quality of food → Perceived image of national cuisine	0.271	p < 0.01
Authenticity of national food → Perceived image of national cuisine	0.178	p > 0.05
Food service quality → Perceived image of national cuisine	0.231	p < 0.05

Source: Authors' calculations

Food quality and taste stood out as the major antecedent of the Perceived image of national cuisine (β= 0.271, p < 0.01). Food service quality influenced the Perceived image of national cuisine slightly less but still significantly (β= 0.231, p < 0.05). The unexpected finding was that the Authenticity of Serbian food did not yield a statistically significant impact on the Perceived image of the national cuisine (β= 0.178, p > 0.05). Obviously, the respondents believed that the Serbian food quality and taste and the friendliness and professionalism of the service staff created a positive image of the national cuisine, but that the local food, despite its good taste and quality, was not sufficiently authentic compared to the national specialties of some other countries. What strikes as a significant point here is that independent variables account for a moderate proportion of the variability in the dependent variable, with the coefficient of determination standing at 0.363).

Figure 1. Structural equation modeling results diagram
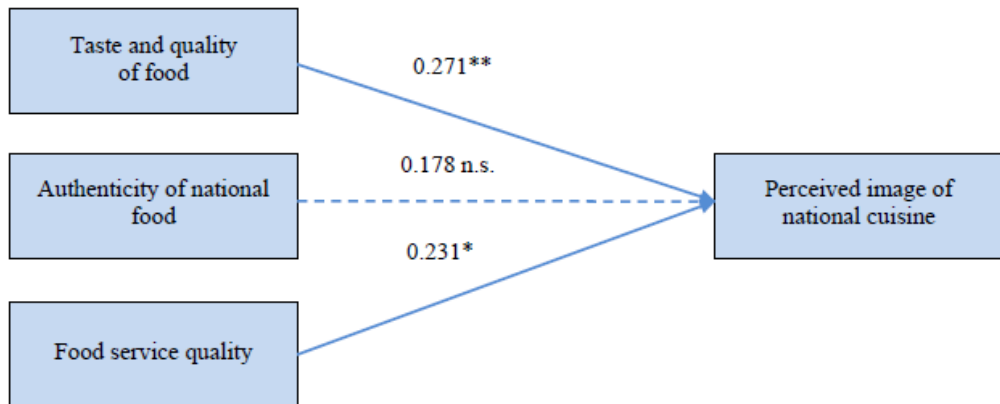
Notes: **Significant at a 0.01 level
*Significant at a 0.05 level
n.s. - Non-significant result

Source: Authors' calculations

Conclusion

The literature review findings suggest that customers prioritize the food quality and pricing as major factors when selecting a specific ethnic restaurant. Certain findings suggest a correlation between respondents' individual preferences and their socioeconomic status, including interior of the ethnic restaurant as one of the factors shaping their positive impression. Subsequent to the interior, service quality emerged as the significant contributor to the perceived image (Marinković, Senić and Mimović, 2015). Given the fact that most of the research results are from Western Balkan region, the overall experience, including the interior and the quality of service, is significant in shaping customers' positive perceptions of an ethnic restaurant after their visit.

Up until now, not many local studies have dealt with the drivers of the perceived image of national cuisine, utilizing a quantitative field research approach. This paper contributes valuable theoretical insights, particularly through a comparative study of the effects of food taste, the authenticity, and service quality on the perceived image. Notably, the structural equation modeling of the data analysis enhances the robustness of the findings. The research results reveal that, according to local respondents, Serbian food is highly regarded for its taste. However, they also highlight that the cuisine lacks distinct authenticity in comparison to the specialties of other nations when shaping the image of national cuisine.

The conducted study has its limitations. Surveys, by nature, capture subjective perceptions of consumers, which may have some degree of divergence from the actual situation. This study recorded a one-time situation, lacking the capability to track changes in consumer perceptions over time. Furthermore, the research model only incorporated three independent variables, and future studies could benefit from using more intricate models. There is also a suggestion to conduct an analysis at the group level. An intriguing avenue for exploration would be to determine to what extent the image of the Serbian national cuisine held by local tourist differ from those of foreigners. This comparative analysis could significantly contribute to gastro-tourism growth in Serbia.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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