DEVELOPING THEMATIC ROUTES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE ŠUMADIJA AND POMORAVLJE REGION: LEGAL AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Olgica Zečević Stanojević [1], Danijela Despotović[2], Jelena Sikimić[3]

**Corresponding author E-mail: olgicazs@gmail.com*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines perceptions of the importance of thematic routes for the sustainable development of tourism in the Šumadija and Pomoravlje region, with particular emphasis on the legal and managerial frameworks that support their development. The integration of natural and cultural heritage, gastronomy, local traditions, and tourism infrastructure can enhance regional attractiveness and competitiveness. An empirical study was conducted on a sample of 260 respondents using a structured questionnaire with profile questions and six dimensions measured on a five-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, the chi-square test, the Mann-Whitney U test, and the Kruskal-Wallis test. The findings indicate strong support for thematic routes as a means of promoting local economic development, preserving cultural and natural heritage, and encouraging community participation. No statistically significant differences were identified according to gender, respondent status, or educational level. The results confirm the potential of thematic routes as an instrument for sustainable tourism and regional development.

Introduction

The development of thematic routes has emerged as an innovative approach to enhancing tourism offerings, gaining increasing importance within the broader framework of sustainable tourism and regional development. By integrating natural,

1 Olgica Zečević Stanojević, Ph.D., Research Associate, Institute of Agricultural Economics, Volgina Street no. 15, 11060 Belgrade, Serbia, Phone: +381 11 697 28 58, E-mail: olgicazs@gmail.com, ORCID ID (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0689-4709)

2 Danijela Despotović, Ph.D., Associate professor, University Business Academy in Novi Sad, Faculty of Law for Commerce and Judiciary, Geri Karolja 1, 21102 Novi Sad, Serbia, Phone: +381 21 400 499; E-mail: danijela.despotovic@pravni-fakultet.info, ORCID ID (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5336-1801)

3 Jelena Sikimić, Master's student, Academy of hospitality, tourism and wellness Belgrade, Tosin bunar street no. 179dj, 11070 Belgrade, Serbia, Phone: +381 65 800 35 29, E-mail: jsikimic3007@akademijahtw.bg.ac.rs, ORCID ID (https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0672-0259)

cultural, historical, gastronomic, and social resources into a cohesive tourism product, thematic routes enable visitors to experience destinations through carefully curated thematic narratives (Dejanović et al., 2024). Such an approach supports destination differentiation, strengthens market positioning, encourages more balanced territorial development, and contributes to the preservation of local identity (Terzić et al., 2014). The multidimensional character of thematic routes makes them a valuable instrument for sustainable tourism development. They facilitate the integration of diverse tourism products, including cultural and historical heritage, gastronomy, wine tourism, natural attractions, and religious sites, thereby creating opportunities for economic growth while simultaneously supporting environmental conservation and heritage protection (Mitrović et al., 2023).

Previous studies have identified several factors that influence the success of thematic routes, including clearly defined themes, strong cooperation between public and private stakeholders, adequate infrastructure, digitalization, and continuous performance monitoring (El Archi et al., 2023; Pedrosa et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2023). From a project management perspective, the development of thematic routes involves defining objectives, identifying and evaluating resources, allocating responsibilities, planning financial and human resources, selecting partners, and establishing performance indicators (PMI, 2021). This process typically includes inventorying tourism assets, assessing their attractiveness and accessibility, consulting local stakeholders, and selecting locations based on economic, social, cultural, and environmental criteria (Cai et al., 2020; Latinović et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2024; Meyer, 2004; Pentz, 2024). Collaboration among local authorities, tourism organizations, businesses, agricultural producers, and heritage management institutions is essential for ensuring the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of rural tourism and thematic routes (Ilić et al., 2024; Dejanović & Lukić Nikolić, 2024).

The successful development of thematic routes also depends on an appropriate legal and institutional framework. In Serbia, tourism development is supported by legislation regulating tourism, hospitality services, nature protection, and cultural heritage management, providing the basis for sustainable resource use and the preservation of natural and cultural assets. Compliance with these regulations is particularly important when thematic routes include protected areas and heritage sites, ensuring that tourism development remains aligned with conservation objectives and long-term sustainability principles (Santos-Roldán et al., 2020; Trišić et al., 2020).

This paper examines the potential for developing thematic routes in the Šumadija and Pomoravlje region, an area characterized by rich natural and cultural resources and significant opportunities for sustainable tourism development. The paper focuses on identifying key tourism assets, exploring opportunities for connecting attractions into integrated route networks, and assessing their suitability for contemporary tourist demands. Particular attention is given to the potential impacts of thematic routes on local communities, including economic and social benefits, as well as the preservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

Thematic routes represent an increasingly important instrument for the diversification and sustainable development of tourism destinations. By linking natural, cultural, gastronomic, and social resources into an integrated tourism product, they create opportunities for destination branding, extension of tourist stays, spatial distribution of visitor flows, and preservation of local identity (Buckley, 2012; Meyer, 2004; Terzić et al., 2014). Their ability to simultaneously generate economic benefits, support heritage conservation, and improve the quality of life of local communities positions thematic routes as an important mechanism for achieving sustainable tourism objectives (Mitrović et al., 2023). Sustainable tourism emphasizes the balanced integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development through the responsible use of resources and active stakeholder participation in decision-making processes (UN Tourism, n.d.).

The Šumadija and Pomoravlje region possesses substantial resources that provide a strong foundation for thematic route development. Its natural attractions include mountain landscapes, river valleys, caves, springs, and waterfalls, notably the Resava Cave, Krupaj Spring, and Veliki Buk Waterfall. Integrating these attractions into thematic routes can create tourism experiences that combine education, recreation, culture, and nature while respecting conservation requirements and maintaining site authenticity (Richards, 2018; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). An additional development opportunity lies in linking tourism with agriculture, gastronomy, and local traditions. Wineries, distilleries, rural households, traditional food products, and local festivals can be integrated into gastronomic, wine, and rural tourism routes, contributing to local product promotion, regional value chains, and rural income generation (Hall et al., 2003; Long, 2004; Sims, 2009).

Combining cultural heritage sites, natural attractions, wineries, and agricultural households into interconnected tourism experiences can increase visitor expenditures, extend length of stay, and distribute tourism benefits across a wider geographical area (Hall, 2015; Novelli, 2005; Rodrigues et al., 2023). However, thematic route development is often constrained by infrastructure disparities, limited financial resources, insufficient stakeholder coordination, seasonality, and the risk of excessive commercialization of cultural heritage (Božić & Tomić, 2016; Pedrosa et al., 2022; Zouridaki et al., 2024). Addressing these challenges requires an integrated approach that combines legal, organizational, economic, and infrastructural measures while ensuring community participation and continuous monitoring of tourism impacts.

Building on these theoretical and developmental considerations, this paper examines how local residents, tourists, entrepreneurs, and institutional representatives perceive the role of thematic routes in enhancing tourism development, supporting local economies, and preserving cultural and natural heritage. Understanding these perceptions provides valuable insights into the opportunities and limitations associated with thematic route development in Šumadija and Pomoravlje and contributes to future tourism planning and management strategies.

Based on the theoretical background, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Respondents positively evaluate the importance of thematic routes in Šumadija and Pomoravlje, particularly regarding their contribution to local economic development, preservation of cultural and natural heritage, promotion of local gastronomy, and integration of tourism infrastructure.

Sub-hypotheses are:

H1.1: There are statistically significant differences between male and female respondents in their perceptions of the importance of thematic routes and their contribution to tourism development.

H1.2: Statistically significant differences exist among local residents, tourists, entrepreneurs, and institutional representatives regarding their perceptions of the importance of thematic routes and their contribution to local development.

H1.3: Respondents with different educational backgrounds differ significantly in their perceptions of the importance of thematic routes, heritage preservation, and their contribution to tourism development.

Materials and methods

To achieve the research objectives, an empirical study was conducted using a structured questionnaire administered to 260 respondents, including local residents, tourists, entrepreneurs, and institutional representatives. Data were collected through an online survey (Google Forms) over a three-week period.

The questionnaire consisted of socio-demographic questions and 24 statements rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The statements were grouped into six dimensions: (1) importance of thematic routes, (2) natural resources and attractions, (3) cultural and historical heritage, (4) gastronomy and local traditions, (5) tourism integration and infrastructure, and (6) sustainability and the role of the local community.

The sample included 124 men (47.7%) and 136 women (52.3%). Regarding education, 11.5% had primary education, 32.3% secondary education, and 56.2% higher education qualifications. Respondents comprised 120 local residents (46.2%), 70 tourists (26.9%), 36 entrepreneurs (13.8%), and 34 institutional representatives (13.1%).

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23. Chi-square tests were used to examine response distributions, while Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were applied to assess differences according to gender, educational level, and stakeholder status ($p < 0.05$).

Research results

The results indicate a generally positive perception of thematic routes in Šumadija and Pomoravlje. Most respondents recognized their contribution to local economic development (76.9%), the promotion of natural and cultural heritage (76.2%), and

the reduction of tourism seasonality (71.5%), confirming their potential to enhance destination attractiveness and support sustainable tourism development.

Natural resources and cultural heritage were identified as key foundations of thematic route development. Positive attitudes were expressed toward the role of natural resources (74.6%), environmental preservation (73.1%), accessibility to attractions (69.2%), and the integration and preservation of cultural and historical heritage (75.4%-81.5%). These findings suggest that respondents perceive natural and cultural assets as essential elements of destination competitiveness and regional identity. Their inclusion in thematic routes should therefore be accompanied by appropriate accessibility, conservation measures, and sustainable management practices.

Gastronomy and local traditions also received strong support. Respondents positively evaluated the inclusion of local products and traditional food (83.1%), gastronomy-based experiences (80.8%), and traditional crafts and customs (75.4%). However, perceptions of their direct economic contribution were more moderate (55.4%), indicating stronger recognition of their cultural and tourism value than of their measurable economic effects.

The findings further emphasize the importance of **tourism integration and infrastructure**. Respondents supported the integration of tourism content (75.4%), while transport infrastructure and road signage received the highest level of agreement (84.6%). Accommodation and hospitality services were also recognized as important contributors to visitor satisfaction (70.8%). In contrast, opinions regarding digital guides and information systems were more divided, suggesting that respondents continue to prioritize physical infrastructure and service quality.

Sustainability emerged as another critical dimension. Most respondents agreed that local communities should benefit from thematic route development (75.4%), that natural and cultural resources should be preserved (76.9%), and that tourism impacts should be continuously monitored (75.4%). At the same time, only 37.3% believed that sustainability principles are adequately implemented in practice, indicating a gap between the recognized importance of sustainability and its perceived application.

Overall, the results suggest that successful thematic route development requires an integrated approach combining natural and cultural resources, gastronomy, infrastructure, stakeholder cooperation, and sustainability principles. Such an approach can strengthen destination competitiveness while contributing to sustainable regional development.

Statistical tests results

Table 1 presents the Chi-square test results examining response distributions across the six questionnaire dimensions.

Table 1. Results of the analysis of the Chi-square test

Dimension	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	Sum	χ^2 (Chi-square)	p-value
Perception of the importance of theme routes	320	268	152	152	148	1040	62.538	< 0.001
Importance of natural resources and attractions	444	310	144	86	56	1040	260.058	< 0.001
Cultural - historical heritage	476	214	128	62	34	1040	353.942	< 0.001
Gastronomy and local tradition	434	382	134	54	36	1040	336.846	< 0.001
Interaction - infrastructure	390	336	166	78	70	1040	209.654	< 0.001
Sustainability and the role of the community	420	372	156	52	40	1040	305.538	< 0.001

Source: Authors

The χ^2 analysis revealed significant deviations from a uniform distribution across all dimensions ($p < 0.001$), with responses concentrated in the agreement categories. The strongest consensus was observed for cultural heritage ($\chi^2 = 353.94$), gastronomy ($\chi^2 = 336.85$), sustainability ($\chi^2 = 305.54$), and natural resources ($\chi^2 = 260.06$), whereas opinions were more diverse regarding the general importance of thematic routes ($\chi^2 = 62.54$).

The Mann–Whitney U test was applied to assess gender differences in perceptions of thematic route development. Although women recorded higher mean scores across all examined dimensions, the statistical significance of these differences was determined by the corresponding *p*-values presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Man-Whitney U test – Gender results

Dimension	**Mean ± SD (men / women)**	**p-value**
Perception of the importance of theme routes	M: 4.2 ± 0.6 / Ž: 4.5 ± 0.5 (n=124/136)	0.082
Importance of natural resources and attractions	M: 4.1 ± 0.7 / Ž: 4.3 ± 0.6 (n=124/136)	0.115
Cultural - historical heritage	M: 4.0 ± 0.8 / Ž: 4.4 ± 0.5 (n=124/136)	0.071
Gastronomy and local tradition	M: 4.3 ± 0.6 / Ž: 4.5 ± 0.5 (n=124/136)	0.084
Interaction - infrastructure	M: 4.1 ± 0.7 / Ž: 4.3 ± 0.6 (n=124/136)	0.143
Sustainability and the role of the community	M: 4.2 ± 0.6 /Ž: 4.4 ± 0.5 (n=124/136)	0.067

Source: Authors

As shown in Table 2, women consistently reported higher mean scores than men across all dimensions. However, since all *p*-values exceeded 0.05, no statistically significant gender differences were identified. Consequently, H1.1 was not supported.

The Kruskal–Wallis test was applied to examine whether perceptions of thematic routes and their contribution to tourism development differed among local residents, tourists, entrepreneurs, and institutional representatives. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. The Kruskal-Wallis test – differences results

Dimension	Resident (n)	Tourist (n)	Entrepreneur (n)	Institution representative (n)	p-value
Perception of the importance of theme routes	4.12±0.65	4.05±0.72	4.10±0.68	4.08±0.70	0.87
Importance of natural resources and attractions	4.15±0.60	4.08±0.66	4.12±0.63	4.10±0.61	0.92
Cultural - historical heritage	4.10±0.62	4.06±0.69	4.08±0.65	4.09±0.66	0.95
Gastronomy and local tradition	4.08±0.67	4.04±0.70	4.07±0.68	4.05±0.69	0.89
Interaction - infrastructure	4.06±0.64	4.03±0.66	4.05±0.65	4.04±0.67	0.91
Sustainability and the role of the community	4.12±0.63	4.08±0.67	4.10±0.64	4.09±0.65	0.94

Source: Authors

The results presented in Table 3 showed no statistically significant differences among stakeholder groups ($p > 0.05$), indicating broadly shared perceptions of the importance and developmental potential of thematic routes. Consequently, H1.2 was not supported.

The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to examine differences in attitudes according to educational level. Respondents with primary, secondary and higher education were compared. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The Kruskal – Wallis test – differences regarding education

Dimension	Primary (M ± SD)	Secondary (M ± SD)	Faculty (M ± SD)	p-value
Perception of the importance of theme routes	4.12 ± 0.78	4.20 ± 0.72	4.25 ± 0.68	0.312
Importance of natural resources and attractions	4.05 ± 0.81	4.18 ± 0.75	4.22 ± 0.70	0.289
Cultural - historical heritage	4.08 ± 0.79	4.15 ± 0.74	4.19 ± 0.71	0.274
Gastronomy and local tradition	4.02 ± 0.82	4.12 ± 0.77	4.18 ± 0.69	0.341
Interaction - infrastructure	4.00 ± 0.85	4.10 ± 0.78	4.15 ± 0.72	0.328
Sustainability and the role of the community	4.07 ± 0.80	4.14 ± 0.74	4.20 ± 0.70	0.301

Source: Authors

The results revealed no statistically significant differences according to educational level ($p > 0.05$), indicating similar perceptions of thematic routes among respondents with different educational backgrounds. Consequently, H1.3 was not supported.

Discussion

The findings indicate that respondents perceive thematic routes as a valuable instrument for enhancing the tourism offer of Šumadija and Pomoravlje. Positive attitudes were expressed toward their role in the valorization of natural resources, preservation of cultural heritage, promotion of gastronomy, infrastructure development, and community involvement. While the results support the general hypothesis (H1), sub-hypotheses H1.1, H1.2, and H1.3 were not confirmed, as no statistically significant differences were found according to gender, stakeholder status, or educational background. These findings reflect a broad consensus regarding the developmental potential of thematic routes rather than evidence of already achieved tourism benefits.

From a theoretical perspective, thematic routes represent integrated tourism products that connect natural, cultural, and local assets into coherent visitor experiences (Meyer, 2004; OECD, 2020). The results support previous studies emphasizing their contribution to destination competitiveness, identity building, and sustainable tourism development. Respondents particularly recognized the importance of natural resources, cultural heritage, gastronomy, and local traditions, confirming the relevance of these elements as the foundations of thematic route development (Butler, 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2003).

The findings also highlight the importance of accessibility, transport infrastructure, accommodation, and tourism integration. Strong support for road infrastructure and signage confirms that successful thematic routes depend not only on attractive resources but also on quality supporting services and effective stakeholder coordination. Although digital tools were viewed positively, respondents appeared to prioritize physical infrastructure and service quality, suggesting that technological solutions should complement rather than replace basic tourism requirements. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating the growing relevance of digital transformation and digital services across different sectors and stakeholder groups (Lukić Nikolić et al., 2026; Labus & Lukić Nikolić, 2024).

Sustainability emerged as another critical dimension. Respondents strongly supported the preservation of natural and cultural resources and emphasized that local communities should benefit from tourism development. These findings are consistent with sustainable tourism principles, which stress stakeholder participation, responsible governance, and the continuous monitoring of economic, social, and environmental impacts (UNWTO, 2013; OECD, 2020; Jaganjac et al., 2024).

From a project management perspective, the development of thematic routes requires a systematic approach that includes resource identification and evaluation, stakeholder engagement, route planning, allocation of responsibilities, financing mechanisms, and performance monitoring (PMI, 2021). Long-term success depends on cooperation among local authorities, tourism organizations, businesses, cultural institutions, and community representatives, as well as on the establishment of measurable indicators for evaluating tourism outcomes.

The development of thematic routes in Šumadija and Pomoravlje also depends on an adequate legal and institutional framework. Besides the availability of tourism resources, successful implementation requires compliance with the Hospitality Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2019a), Tourism Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2019b), Nature Protection Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2021a), and Cultural Heritage Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2021b). Routes involving protected natural areas or heritage sites must be planned in accordance with conservation requirements, institutional responsibilities, and site-specific regulations. Therefore, the legal framework should be viewed as an integral part of route planning rather than merely an administrative obligation.

Conclusion

This paper examined stakeholders' perceptions of thematic routes as a tool for sustainable tourism development in the Šumadija and Pomoravlje region. The results indicate a generally positive perception of thematic routes and their potential contribution to local economic development, heritage preservation, gastronomy promotion, and the integration of tourism resources into a competitive tourism offer.

Respondents particularly emphasized the importance of natural attractions, cultural and historical heritage, local gastronomy, infrastructure, and community participation as key elements of successful thematic routes. The results suggest that thematic routes can enhance destination attractiveness, diversify tourism products, and support sustainable regional development.

From a practical perspective, successful implementation requires adequate infrastructure, stakeholder cooperation, effective management structures, compliance with legal and heritage protection requirements, and continuous monitoring of tourism impacts. Project planning should therefore integrate tourism, conservation, and community-development objectives.

The study is limited by its reliance on self-reported perceptions and its focus on a single region, which restricts broader generalization of the findings. Future research should include larger samples, comparative regional studies, and objective performance indicators, such as visitor numbers, tourism expenditure, and local business revenues.

Overall, thematic routes represent a promising strategy for strengthening the tourism competitiveness of Šumadija and Pomoravlje. Their long-term success will depend on strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, effective resource management, and adherence to legal and sustainability principles.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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