

Tourist potential of Balkan traditional food: locals' perspective

Potencial turístico de la cocina tradicional balcánica: la perspectiva local¹

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Abstract

The main goal of this research is to highlight the specifics and tourist potential of Balkans cuisine from the perspective of the local population. This study examines whether Balkan cuisine's image is considered a multidimensional construct and whether there are differences in traditional cuisine perception in different Balkan countries, indicating a relationship between the extracted dimensions and the tourist potential. The research design was based on a semi-structured survey conducted with a sample of 110 respondents from five Balkan countries (Southeast Europe). Standard statistical testing was performed using SPSS version 24.0. The results confirmed the multidimensionality of the perceived Balkan cuisine image, for which four variables were selected. No statistically significant differences in the perception of the dimensions of Balkan cuisine were found among residents of the five countries. The results indicate that quality and uniqueness significantly contribute to the overall tourist potential of Balkan food, whereas the contribution of the nutritive characteristics of food is considered insignificant. Moreover, the recognition of the great value of Balkan gastronomy in tourism offers and tourism branding of the entire region is outlined. Combined qualitative-quantitative approach confirmed recognition of national food characteristics as common within a wider regional scope.

Key words: gastronomy, Balkan region, Balkan cuisine, food image, tourist potential

Resumen

El objetivo principal de esta investigación es resaltar las especificidades y el potencial turístico de la cocina Balcánica desde la perspectiva de la población local. Este estudio examina si la imagen de la cocina Balcánica se considera una construcción multidimensional y si existen diferencias en la percepción de la cocina tradicional en diferentes países balcánicos. También esto poder indicar relación entre las dimensiones extraídas y el potencial turístico. El diseño de la investigación se basó en una encuesta realizada con una muestra de 110 encuestados de cinco países de región Balcanes (Sureste de Europa). Las pruebas estadísticas estándar se realizaron con SPSS versión 24.0. Los resultados confirmaron la imagen multidimensional percibida de la cocina balcánica, para lo cual se seleccionaron cuatro variables. No se encontraron diferencias estadísticamente significativas en la percepción de las dimensiones de la cocina balcánica entre los residentes de los cinco países. Los resultados indican que la calidad y la singularidad contribuyen significativamente al potencial turístico general de la gastronomía de los Balcanes. Alrededor de eso, la contribución de las características nutritivas de la comida tradicional se considera insignificante. Además, se destaca el reconocimiento del gran valor de la gastronomía Balcánica en la oferta turística y la marca turística de toda la región. El enfoque cualitativo-cuantitativo combinado confirmó el reconocimiento de las características alimentarias nacionales como comunes dentro de un ámbito regional más amplio.

Palabras claves: gastronomía, región de los Balcanes, cocina Balcánica, imagen de cocina, potencial turístico.

Introduction

Food plays an important role in the promotion of tourism. Gastronomy is an important aspect of tourism development, representing cultural heritage assets as well as the climate, culture, and history of a place that affect food characteristics. Food and nutrition reflect the cultural identity of a certain region, connecting places and identities, and the social, cultural, and natural characteristics of certain areas. Hence, local gastronomic traditions are important in creating tourism products and destination images (Cordova-Buiza et al. 2021; Demirović et al., 2017). Local food provides a destination with a unique strategic position (Horng & Tsai, 2010; Sánchez, et al., 2015), granting tourists fully authentic gastronomic experiences.

Tourist destinations promote links between territory and gastronomy through the development and improvement of tourist offers based on specific national cuisine or regional/local dishes (Pamukçu et al. 2021; Timothy, 2016). Some scholars argue that each region possesses authentic agricultural/food products and dishes that are interesting to tourists (Kalenjuk & Đerčan, 2012; Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). Such gastronomic uniqueness might adhere to an easier differentiation process in the competitive tourist market. The use of food as a brand creation resource allows the incorporation of cultural resources into the urban planning process, as culture is a significant factor in the image promotion and preservation of regional identity (Lin et al., 2011). Guidelines for the development of gastronomic tourism (UNWTO, 2019) outline the importance of raising awareness and recognizing local gastronomy as a cultural heritage. Thus, strengthening culinary identity through local products is an important step in the development of gastronomy tourism.

The preconditions for joint regional brand development are stakeholder cooperation and the recognition of joint cultural heritage (reflected in gastronomy). However, research has indicated insufficient willingness and incorporation of local communities in the decision-making process, as well as a lack of inter-sectoral connectivity, negatively affecting the general recognition and protection of cultural resources (Terzić et al., 2015). Opinions and stands of locals about local cultural heritage are important for recognizing the attractiveness and assessing the possibility of including local tourism assets in the tourism development process (Terzić et al., 2015). Sustainable tourism development refers to the development of tourism that provides direct benefits to local populations. The Second Global Report on Gastronomy Tourism confirmed that the development of gastronomy tourism enhances the livelihood of the local community (UNWTO, 2017).

Balkan cuisine emerged because of the mixing of various nations and cultures during the turbulent history of the Balkans, which left their marks on the gastronomic traditions of the area. Characteristics of Balkan cuisine as particularly important in the context of the creation of a potential regional tourist brand (Jovičić Vuković & Terzić,

2020). Radović Marković and Pindžo (2020) indicate that, despite Western Balkan's economies having rich and varied gastronomic offers, they are insufficiently used for marketing or added value of the overall tourist offer. The main aim of the research is to analyze the locals' perceptions of Balkan cuisine's image and define the possibilities and perspectives of gastronomy tourism development. The obtained results can serve as a tool that destination managers can use to create a basis for tourism image-building strategy and give a provision for the creation of a unique Gastronomy Tourism Brand of the Balkan region.

Literature Review

Gastronomy and Tourism

The gastronomic offer is a key factor in the positioning of tourist destinations worldwide. The dynamism of the global tourist environment has incorporated gastronomy into existing tourist products to improve tourist offers, attract more tourists, and extend the tourist season (Blešić et al., 2021; Getz & Robinson, 2014). One of the main reasons is the strong connection between certain localities and certain types of food, such as the unbreakable link between land, climate, and food product types in a particular country (Gajić et al., 2020). According to UNWTO (2017) report, gastronomy is a distinctive and strategic element that defines the image and destination brand.

Gastronomy tourism involves travel that focuses primarily on consuming local food and beverages, including introducing different cultures, acquiring knowledge, and understanding the quality or attributes of tourist products and culinary delights in certain regions. In addition, gastronomy tourism includes activities such as visits to food producers and gastro-events (Gajić et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2013; Son & Xu, 2013). Even when food is not the primary motive for travel, gastronomy is an indispensable part of every travel which adds value to traditional tourist visits and completes tourist experiences. The development and popularization of this tourism niche are supported by the creation of various theme routes based on gastronomy (Niedbała et al., 2020), TV shows (Hall & Mitchell, 2007; Kim et al., 2012), and gastro-bloggers (Madriz & Tejedor, 2020), etc. Certain products with geographical indications guarantee product specificity and quality (Pamukçu et al., 2021; UNWTO, 2012).

The development of gastronomy tourism brings synergistic economic effects (Andersson et al., 2017), especially in developing countries (Mgonja et al., 2017): tourism development outside the main tourist season (UNWTO, 2012), development of rural areas, support and motivation for entrepreneurship, employment and self-employment, increased consumer spending per tourist, marketing of local products, incentives for food and wine producers, and greater demand for local food products (Niedbała et al., 2020; Nikolić et al., 2020). Support for retaining authentic ambiance, culture, and traditions; improving destination image; creating of a regional brand; and designing high-quality

tourist products (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021). Through the empowerment of local communities unique and competitive gastronomy provides sustainable development of destinations (especially in rural areas).

Relations between tourism and gastronomy can be observed from the point of view of consumers (residents or tourists), as well from the standpoint of food producers, and the impact that gastronomic tourism has on destinations. For an understanding of gastronomy tourism, studies examining motivation and tourist interest in food are of great importance (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021), while pleasurable food experiences might become a reason for repeated visits (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Push and pull factors determine gastronomy tourism. Su et al. (2020) indicates the existence of multidimensionality of food travel motivations and singles out three push factors (taste of food, socialization, and cultural experiences) and three pull factors (core food-tourism appeals, traditional food appeals, and local destination appeals).

Food Image

An image might be defined as a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions about a product or a place. Extant literature explains food image (traditional cuisine) as a set of attributes that reflect the role that food has in the creation of a brand image of a destination (Lin et al., 2011; Sims, 2009). The study of Lin et al. (2011) describes the use of food as a form of destination identity from stakeholders' perspectives. Her results show that certain destinations and countries can increase their competitiveness by building recognizable food and local cuisine images offered in the tourist market, particularly through promotion campaigns based on gastronomy. As a result, greater visitation of destinations is expected. Some studies have provided evidence of a significant relationship between destination food image and revisit intentions (Kim et al., 2012).

Traditional gastronomic destinations such as France, Italy, Mexico, and Japan use food as basic attractiveness attributes. These countries went even a step further in legitimizing traditional cuisine and local food culture under the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, to gain a competitive position in food and cuisine images that will influence tourists' decision making (Cuccia et al., 2016; Pearson and Pearson, 2016). As Mohanty et al. (2020) note, tourism enables the creation of a food pathway emphasizing the biological sustenance performed by food functions that are essential for visitors. It also provides them with opportunities to learn about various cultures through food and local dishes.

More recently, various studies are dedicated to the connections between gastronomy and tourism, published in leading international journals indexed by the SSCI (Okumus et al., 2018), focusing on destinations renowned by food. In particular, Italy, France, Japan, and Hong Kong are among destinations whose brand images are intrinsically connected with their national identity (UNWTO, 2012). Studies that examine

developing countries and destinations have appeared in the academic literature more recently, and several studies have considered food cultures in the Balkan region (Jovičić Vuković & Terzić, 2020; Nikolić et al., 2020; Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Vuksanović et al., 2019; Vuksanović & Demirović Bajrami, 2020; Uğurlu, 2015). Research devoted to gastronomy tourism and food-related issues in developing countries, often labeled as emerging tourism destinations, especially in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia), is limited (Yasami et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that the perceived image of local food is a multidimensional phenomenon, indicating that it is possible to identify the following food dimensions: (1) appearance, (2) health-related characteristics, (3) uniqueness and (4) other characteristics (Gupta et al., 2020). Lai et al. (2018) has different attributes: (1) place and geographic environment; (2) food and cuisine culture; (3) food and people; (4) food quality; (5) dining places/restaurants; and (6) food activities. Vuksanović and Demirović Bajrami (2020) outline four dimensions of local gastronomy: (1) uniqueness and cultural heritage, (2) food quality and price, (3) nutrition and health benefits of food, and (4) effective image of food.

Most studies consider the multidimensionality of local food from the perspective of tourist experiences (Chi et al., 2013; Vuksanović & Demirović Bajrami, 2020), while only a few consider the perceptions of residents on the same issue (Jovičić Vuković & Terzić, 2020; Lin et al., 2011). Previous studies dedicated to food images from a local perspective are more geographically oriented. Geographical boundaries are also important. They have implications for strategic management and destination planning, as economic, cultural, and political unity is often established within boundaries. The general focus of studies conducted on tourists overlooks the distinct local identities that are unique to a region as a whole (Lai et al., 2018).

The aim of this research is to examine the traditional cuisine of the Balkan region from a local perspective, seeking to:

- Identify dimensions of the perceived image of local cuisine.
- Examine whether there are any differences in the perceived image and characteristics of the local cuisine among residents of five Balkan countries.
- Investigate the relationship between dimensions of the perceived image of Balkan cuisine and tourist potential of gastronomy tourism within the Balkans.

The main aim of the research is operationalized through three hypotheses:

- H1. Image of the Balkan cuisine is multidimensional based on its basic characteristics.
- H2. There are no differences between perceptions of Balkan cuisine characteristics among residents of five Balkan countries.
- H3. The main characteristics of Balkan food (uniqueness, quality, and nutrition) have significant and positive effects on its tourist potential.

Methodology

Study area

The Balkans signify the region that encompasses the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe, bordered by the Sava and Danube rivers in the north, Mediterranean, Black, Mramor, Egean, Ionian, and Adriatic seas. There are seven states in the Balkans: Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia.

It also includes parts of Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, and Turkey. Different nationalities, religious affiliations, customary practices, and cultures have influenced the dietary practices of people inhabiting this region. There is obvious intermingling of gastronomic characteristics and food preparation practices in its full variability. Nations that live in the Balkan Peninsula have developed different national cuisines but with multiple similarities (Jovičić Vuković & Terzić, 2020). Balkan cuisine is naturally diverse due to ethnic diversity and turbulent history. The entire region has experienced various influences, from ancient Greeks and Romans who started the production of olives and wine, to the Byzantium, Ottomans, but also Italian and German (Austro-Hungarian). Various cultures have determined the character of Balkan food culture, which goes beyond the borders of the individual countries of the region (Krasteva-Blagoeva & Bogueva, 2021), making Balkan cuisine and gastronomic customs more sophisticated (Uğurlu, 2015). According to Krasteva-Blagoeva and Bogueva (2021), culinary traditions in the Balkans are a complex system of joint cultural values and common nutritional practices, establishing and maintaining national cuisines within the framework of regional food culture.

To address the above-mentioned issues, non-probability sampling was used to recruit participants to form special online focus groups gathered virtually on the Zoom platform. The study included 110 respondents from five countries (Croatia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia). Apart from the joint discussion on various aspects of Balkan cuisine perception, a special questionnaire was developed and distributed to participants to provide a more concrete analysis of their traditional food perceptions. Data were coded and analyzed using the statistical software IBM SPSS 24.0. The statistical data processing methods used in this study were frequency analysis, descriptive statistics, and instrument reliability. Explanatory factor analysis, ANOVA, and regression were used to test the hypotheses.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part included the socio-demographic variables of the respondents, such as gender, age, country of origin, and nationality. The second part, based on previous studies (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014), included questions about traveling habits (travel frequency, and travel motivation), as well as questions about the role of the gastronomic offer in the process of destination

choice as well as the role of gastronomy in the level of satisfaction with the destination. The third part of the questionnaire included 15 attributes of Balkan foods. Some attributes related to food were previously identified by Peštek and Činjarević (2014), such as: authentic, recognizable, unique/original, part of the cultural heritage, tasty, high quality, value for money/price, diverse, organic/natural, easily digestible, and healthy. Attributes related to the general role of gastronomy as tourist potential such as Balkan cuisine is...” significant for the promotion of the region”, "has potential to improve tourist image of the region", "significant for the creation of joint tourist offer", "has potential to become a tourist brand" were added by authors. Respondents were asked to rate the attributes on a Likert scale (1 - "completely disagree" to 5 - "completely agree").

Sample

Due to the low response rates in some countries, there was an unequal distribution of sample sizes between countries. This resulted in respondents from Serbia having the greatest share in the sample with a 33.3 %, followed by Montenegrins 21.4% share and Bosnians – 17.9% share. The structure of nationalities differed from the country of living in favor of the Serbian group of respondents (43.6% share). Such an ethnic distribution is justified by the fact that in other countries, there are also Serbian ethnic communities (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia) (Table 1). The average age of the respondents in the survey was 36.37 years, with the youngest respondent aged 16 and the oldest 78.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	36	30.8	32.7
	Female	74	63.2	67.3
Country	Croatia	12	10.3	10.9
	North Macedonia	13	11.1	11.8
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	21	17.9	19.1
	Montenegro	25	21.4	22.7
	Serbia	39	33.3	35.5
Nationality	Croatian	13	11.1	11.8
	Macedonian	13	11.1	11.8
	Bosnian	14	12.0	12.7
	Montenegrin	19	16.2	17.3
	Serbian	51	43.6	46.4

Source: Authors' calculations

Results

Role of gastronomy in travel motivation

The results have shown that respondents travel 7.37 times within domestic destinations and 2.63 times annually within regional scope (Balkans), while outbound travel scored 2.91 trips annually. The dominant motive of travel is vacation (70.9%) and

experience-related trips (19.1%), with relatively low results in socialization (7.3%) and learning about new cultures (2.7%). It indicates that gastronomy is not a dominant travel motive of respondents. Most respondents chose their travel destinations without considering gastronomic offer as a significant factor in destination choice ($M=3.35$, $SD=1.17$). Their overall satisfaction with destination tends to be highly influenced by food quality and diversity of gastronomic offer ($M=3.80$, $SD=0.98$) (Jovičić Vuković & Terzić, 2020), which is in line with previous studies (Andersson et al., 2017; Pearson et al., 2011).

Multidimensionality of Balkan cuisine

To investigate the attributes of Balkan cuisine, we have conducted an Explanatory Factor Analysis. All 15 variables presented in Table 2 showed acceptable to high-standardized factor loadings (e.g., higher than the recommended minimum value of 0.5), indicating that selected attributes adequately represent the domain of construct (dimension of the gastronomic image of the Balkans). As presented in Table II, four factors were labeled based on the consideration of basic attributes in the context of gastronomy's role in tourist perception of destination (Nikolić, et al. 2020; Peštek & Ćinjurević, 2014), which confirms hypothesis H1.

Table 2. Results of Explanatory Factor Analysis

Rotated Component Matrix ^a				
ATTRIBUTES, n = 101	Factor Loadings	Eigen value	Variance Explained %	Cronbach α
F1 - TOURIST POTENTIAL		3.303	24.045	.925
Has potential to improve image of the region	.861			
Significant for creation of joint tourist offer	.848			
Has potential to become a tourist brand	.825			
Significant for the promotion of the region	.769			
F2 - UNIQUENESS		3.063	20.026	.878
Authentic	.870			
Recognizable	.838			
Unique/ Original	.814			
Part of cultural heritage	.541			
F3 - QUALITY		3.337	18.837	.860
Tasty	.835			
High Quality	.719			
Value for money/price	.719			
Diverse	.605			
Natural/Organic	.459			
F4 - NUTRITION		1.645	12.312	.698
Easily Digestible	.862			
Healthy	.783			
Total variance extracted = 75.220; KMO = .870; Bartlett's test of Sphericity ($p<0.001$); Cronbach α =.926 Extraction Method: PCA; Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization.				
a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.				

Source: Authors' calculations

The convergent validity of constructs was assessed by calculating the composite reliability estimates (Cronbach's α coefficient). All four dimensions of the Balkan cuisine image met the accepted cut-off value of 0.7 for Cronbach's Alpha, indicating high internal

consistency between variables within each factor. The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 2. Factor 1 labeled as "Tourist potential" accounted 24.05% out of total variance gathering four items with reliability alpha calculated to 0.925; Factor 2 labeled as "Uniqueness" explained 20.026% out of total variance with reliability alpha calculated to 0.878 and incorporating four items; Factor 3 labeled "Quality" explained 18.837% of total variance with reliability alpha calculated to .707, incorporating five items; and Factor 4 labeled as "Nutrition" explained 12.312% of the total variance, with reliability alpha calculated to 0.698, including two items – "easily digestible" and "healthy". The reliability alpha for all factors is calculated $\alpha = 0.926$, which indicates satisfaction of the initial criterion (above 0.60).

Differences in Balkan cuisine perception

According to Table 3, there were no statistical differences in Balkan cuisine perceptions between people from different countries considering defined factors related to Food Uniqueness, Quality, Nutrition, and Tourism Potentials. The Eta coefficient indicates that there is a very weak association between the two categories, which confirms that there are no true statistical differences in Balkan cuisine characteristics among respondents depending on their country of living. This confirms hypothesis H2.

Table 3. Results of ANOVA test

Country	Uniqueness		Quality		Nutrition		Tourist potential	
	m	sd	m	sd	m	sd	m	sd
Croatia	4.021	0.607	4.338	0.555	2.958	0.656	4.271	.548
North Macedonia	3.846	1.048	4.200	0.688	2.923	0.862	4.153	1.179
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4.262	1.038	4.438	0.877	3.095	0.983	4.452	0.897
Montenegro	4.080	0.831	4.040	0.698	2.780	1.109	4.010	0.920
Serbia	3.987	0.821	4.241	0.597	2.769	0.802	4.115	0.763
ANOVA Difference Between Groups	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
	.541	.706	1.030	.396	.542	.706	.853	.495
Measures of Association	Eta (η)	η^2	η	η^2	η	η^2	η	η^2
	.142	.020	.194	.038	.142	.020	.177	.031
*m=arithmetic mean; sd=standard deviation								

Source: Authors' calculations

Confirmed by the survey results, Balkan cuisine is generally perceived as extremely tasty (4.7), of high quality and variety (4.3) and value for money (4.3). It is also perceived to be a part of joint heritage (4.3), along with being perceived as relatively recognizable, authentic, and original (3.9). On the other hand, its nutritive characteristics (organic, healthy, and easily digestible) are far less valued (3.2). Joint perceptions on food characteristics are also present in most included individual variables, with the only

exception of the issue being "Natural/Organic" where the ANOVA test indicated statistical difference ($F=3.261$; $p=0.015$), while other variables have high consistency in respondent opinions. The issue of Balkan traditional cuisine being perceived as natural/organic is more neutrally perceived by Macedonian ($M=3.62$, $Std.=1.193$), Montenegrin ($M=3.28$, $Std.=1.061$) and Serbian ($M=3.64$, $Std.=.959$) respondents, while the most positive opinion towards organic characteristics of Balkan cuisine was perceived by Croatian ($M=4.25$, $Std.=0.866$) and Bosnian ($M=4.19$, $Std.=0.981$) respondents.

The Balkan cuisine tourist potential

Balkan gastronomy's role in the determination of tourist potential of the region is rated very high. It is important for the promotion of the region and creation of a joint regional tourist product ($M=4.1$), as well as important for the improvement of the Balkan image and creation of the regional tourist brand (4.3). However, the role of Gastronomy as a potential tourist brand has different importance levels in explored Balkan countries, with extremely high importance in Bosnia and Herzegovina (4.52), Croatia ($M=4.33$) and Serbia (4.31), and a bit less in North Macedonia (4.23) and Montenegro (4.08). Multiple linear regression analysis was used to predict the pattern of relationship between the set of independent variables (uniqueness, quality, and nutrition) and the dependent variable (tourist potential) based on the proposed model summary R^2 of 0.475 * (Table 4).

Table 4. Results of Regression Analysis

Model Summary						
Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.700 ^a	.490	.475	.62468		
a. Predictors: (Constant), NUTRITION, UNIQUENESS, QUALITY						
ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	39,679	3	13,226	33,894	.000 ^b
	Residual	41,364	106	.390		
	Total	81,043	109			
a. Dependent Variable: TOURIST_POTENTIAL						
b. Predictors: (Constant), NUTRITION, UNIQUENESS, QUALITY						
Coefficients ^a						
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	.450	.377		1,194	.235	
UNIQUENESS	.233	.090	.236	2,594	.011	
QUALITY	.636	.122	.508	5,223	.000	
NUTRITION	.031	.077	.032	.398	.691	
a. Dependent Variable: TOURIST_POTENTIAL						

Source: Authors' calculations

F-test on the final regression equation verified that two dimensions of local cuisine - Quality ($p = 0.000$) and Uniqueness ($p = 0.011$) significantly contribute to the overall tourist potential of the Balkan food, while the contribution of the Nutritive characteristics of food ($p = 0.691$) is considered a rather insignificant factor, resulting from the rejection of hypothesis H3. Findings of Vuksanović and Demirović Bajrami (2020) related to the perceptions of various dimensions of regional food among foreign tourists visiting the Vojvodina region (Serbia), indicated that food nutrition and health benefits of food failed to enter regression equation as well. It provided some certainty that this dimension was not significantly related to tourist satisfaction with food experience, and therefore placed its general contribution to the creation of tourist products into the second plan. The same study confirmed a stand that food quality is the most salient in explaining tourist satisfaction with food experience, followed by food uniqueness (Vuksanović & Demirović Bajrami, 2020).

Discussion

According to previous research findings, a specific image of Balkan food exists, and it is reflected in the perception of a typical continental culinary experience (Jovičić Vuković & Terzić, 2020; Vuksanović et al., 2019). Balkan food culture is considered a variegated blend of dishes and food ingredients typical for the whole region. However, it is commonly considered unique and belongs to a particular national cuisine only (Krasteva-Blagoeva & Bogueva, 2021). The level of recognition of a multitude of local dishes as being regionally present, with just a few regarded as truly unique. This provides some certainty of the potential of Balkan food positioning as a regional tourist brand. Balkan food represents a common asset and representative cultural element of all Balkan countries. The gastronomic offer of these countries should be positioned at the international market as a complementary and not competitive aspect of tourist offer, developing a specific regional gastronomic brand. Balkan gastronomy is already recognizable on the tourist market, and in some cases, even became the primary motivation of tourists exploring the region. Presented results confirmed relations between food characteristics and interrelated cultural and tourism aspects.

This inevitably influences society's gross root level in social and economic viability as well as the tourism destination marketing process (Mohanty et al., 2020). The global trends affect the synergy between tourism and the food industry in a way that can change tourists' food habits. Such changes go towards seeking more diverse food offers at destinations (Čaušević & Hrelja, 2020). About a third of total tourist expenses at the destination is spent on food and beverages. Like so, it is normal for tourists' seeking more value for money to be reflected in food diversity, authenticity, and quality. In the globalization process, food systems and choices are continuously changing, revealing that the critical factors influencing food choice are sensory appeal, purchase convenience, health, and natural content. In contrast, the least significant ones are familiarity and ethical concerns.

Like our findings, the role of food quality seems to be decisive in defining tourist potentials of the Balkan region. According to Vuksanović and Demirović Bajrami (2020) the uniqueness of the food is more important than its nutritive characteristics. However, the uniqueness of food as a dimension is more respected by residents than foreign tourists. Such findings contribute to the stand that the uniqueness of the local food is nurtured as a part of local identity. In the case of the Balkan region, the food characteristics blended with the cultural essence of a destination. This opens a possibility for gastronomy to become the fundamental aspect of the tourism offer of the region (Mohanty et al., 2020).

Despite the obvious potential of Balkan cuisine to contribute to tourism development, availability and international food trade are hampered because of different laws, standards, and requirements. Tekiner (2021) notes rather limited information available on the nutritional and health aspects of traditional Balkan food. The same study outlines that, within the region, traditional foods maintain positive image (Barjolle et al., 2011). Such a general stand is resulting in people considering traditional cuisines to be healthy, retaining their eating habits and food choices (Sproesser et al., 2019; Tekiner, 2021). Tekiner (2021) argues that Balkan food's nutritional and hygienic status must be considered more prior to international marketing. Based on European regulations and some ongoing trends in food choices of Balkan people, the transformation of the food consumption practices towards a healthier diet seems inevitable. Hence, the future of Balkan gastronomy lies in the transformation of traditional food based on its nutritional and health-related aspects (currently overlooked). Despite the underestimated role of nutrition factors in people's perception, there are high expectations when it comes to the tourism potentials of Balkan gastronomy.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the literature by representing food images from the perspective of local population. It outlines that the recognition of local gastronomy as a cultural heritage asset is crucial for its conversion into a tourist brand. The study results indicate the multidimensionality of Balkan food, which the local population recognizes through four dimensions: quality, uniqueness, nutrition, and tourist potential. Examining the differences between people originating from different Balkan countries provides evidence of the common perception of the main characteristics of Balkan food. Additionally, the results showed that the quality and uniqueness of Balkan food significantly contribute to the overall tourist potential of Balkan gastronomy, whereas the contribution of the nutritive characteristics of traditional food is considered an insignificant factor.

Gastronomy is an inseparable part of local and regional cultures that have been passed down through generations. Thus, it represents the intangible cultural heritage asset that must be preserved, improved, and used in sustainable tourism development. Obtaining the results on the Balkan food image, as perceived by inhabitants of five Balkan

countries, indicates specific unity in terms of perception, which is a good starting point for creating a common regional brand. Such results can become the basis for further research and the starting point of strategic planning, providing valuable information to national tourism organizations (NTOs) and destination management destinations (DMOs) in the creation of joint gastronomic tourist products and unique regional brands of the Balkans. Traditional Balkan cuisine, with all its specifics, might become an attractive factor for attracting international tourists. Creating cultural routes based on gastronomy, popularizing gastronomic events, improving the presence and promotion of Balkan traditional dishes in digitalized marketplaces, and supporting local producers' promotion and entrepreneurship can provide significant positive synergic effects in tourism development in the region.

Despite the contributions of this study, it has some limitations. The perceptions of Balkan cuisine were considered from a limited and single-sided local perspective. Thus, it is necessary to explore this issue using similar surveys conducted with larger samples and covering a wider regional outreach. It is also important to consider the perceptions of Balkan cuisine among stakeholders and tourists.

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