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THE FUTURE OF SERBIAN RURAL TOURISM OBSERVED THROUGH THE PRISM OF GASTRONOMY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

As the world slowly recovers from COVID-19 and borders gradually begin to open, changes are also expected in tourism trends. The aim of the research was to determine to what extent gastronomy as a tourism product will contribute to the development of rural tourism in some future period. By researching the quality of gastronomic products in rural households, and the expectations of the hosts, it was concluded that all predictors can significantly predict the future development of rural tourism through a stronger presentation of gastronomic products in Serbia. The sample included 225 respondents. A model of higher order factor analysis and hierarchical regression analysis were used, with the introduction of a mediator variable. The importance of research is reflected in encouraging the development of rural tourism products, with implications for the overall economic and social environment.

Key Words: *tourism, future, rural development, gastronomy, Serbia*
JEL classification: *R2, Q1*

Introduction

The Republic of Serbia has great resources for the development of rural tourism. With the continuous involvement of economic and non-economic activities, rural tourism should become one of the generators of the development of the Republic and the growth of overall economic activities. There is a corresponding demand for rural tourism products in Serbia, with

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the expected tendency of even faster growth in the future. The specific rural gastronomic offer can be especially emphasized, with the help of which rural tourism will experience expansion in the tourist market in the future (Cvijanović & Gajić, 2020). The tourism sector in Serbia is an industry that has suffered large losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the last two years. So far, 273.7 million people have been infected in the world, and more than 5.4 million have died (Worldometers, 2021). More than 12.366 people have died in Serbia since the beginning of the epidemic, and more than 1.280.644 people have been infected (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). The last in a series of changes in Serbia was during the last weekend in February 2021, when, due to the increase in the number of infected people, the working hours of catering facilities were shortened to 2 pm (Gajić et al., 2021a; Gajić et al., 2021b). It is very unknown when the recovery of the tourism sector will begin, so it is very ungrateful to give any forecasts about losses in tourism (Blešić et al., 2021). The number of overnight stays of foreign tourists in 2021 was lower by 58.3% compared to March 2019. In the first two months of 2020, 453.728 tourists stayed in Serbia, and a total of 1.419.313 overnight stays were recorded, with the largest number of domestic tourists in terms of arrivals and overnight stays (Cvijanović & Gajić, 2020; Cvijanović et al., 2021a; Gajić et al., 2021c). When it declared a state of emergency due to the Corona virus pandemic on March 15, 2020, Serbia closed its borders to traffic, canceling international passenger flights. According to the official website that publishes data on the course of the pandemic in the world, there has been a decline in the total number of international arrivals by 20 to 30 percent compared to 2019. This cause a drop in revenue about 300-450 billion dollars in world (Worldometers, 2021). The tourism and hospitality industry suffers a lot, and suffers severe consequences due to the shortening of working hours or the closure of facilities until the time when you can stay without passes. The only area in tourism that has found some unique solutions for survival in the crisis period is rural tourism and gastronomy. Due to restrictive measures by the state, all trips are directed towards domestic, rural tourism. However, restaurant facilities also had a solution for survival in this period of crisis. Namely, restaurants and other facilities have found a way to deliver food to consumers, but that is certainly not the long-term goal of restaurant survival. The authors of the paper tried to determine the quality of the complete rural offer, including the gastronomic product, in order to determine whether these elements can predict the future development of rural tourism product in Serbia, expanding the gastronomic offer.

The importance of research is reflected primarily in finding solutions to overcome the crisis situation in which Serbian tourism is affected. However, due to the fact that rural domestic tourism experienced expansion during the pandemic, it is possible to seize the opportunity on the market and place a gastronomic offer as one of the key factors for the recovery of rural tourism and better placement in the tourism market after the pandemic.

Literature review

Negative impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector and assumptions of recovery

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global problem in some parts of the world was the excessive development of tourism. However, the question arises as to what will happen when the pandemic period ends, and in which direction the tourist development in Serbia and the world will take place. If something does not change in the next few months, the crisis could take 75 million jobs in this industry and some 2.1 billion dollars less income (Huynh et al., 2021). The hotel industry is suffering great losses everywhere, experts predict that it will not fully recover until 2023, more luxurious hotels before those with fewer stars. Tourists prefer to choose cottages, houses in nature, preferably something that can be reached by car, instead of luxury hotels (Gajić et al., 2021b). The pandemic, in addition to health, also had a psychological effect on people. That is why, according to tourism consultants, a good part of them will, out of fear and caution, decide on transport and a location where they will not be surrounded by many people (Santos, 2020). The pandemic and the fear of the virus are changing the rules in tourism, and that is felt everywhere (Boaurar et al., 2020). Faced with a crisis in some parts of the world, such as Asia, some companies have introduced innovations - in the description of the apartment can now be found to be "extremely clean", "Covid-friendly" or well cleaned, disinfected, with a note and that it is "extremely safe" (Fountain, 2021). Many scientists and theorists believe that there will be perceptions of the growing importance of security, reducing risk, increasing cleanliness, reliability and predicting threats. There is a continuing need for a better understanding of changes in the behavior of passengers and employees, in order to understand changes in the demands of tourists (Assaf et al., 2021). New measures of the state, as well as the implemented vaccination of citizens, have created opportunities for opening tourist destinations during 2021 (Spalević & Stanišić, 2021). The situation with tourism and catering companies is in a catastrophic decline. Travel companies, travel agencies and the accommodation sector have

suffered the greatest economic losses compared to other stakeholders (Huynh et al., 2021). According to Bouarar (2020), research indicates that the impact of COVID-19 on tourism in Algeria has been weak, as Algeria's tourism revenues are already very low. Anzai et al. (2020), statistical models have been established to assess the impact of travel reduction, through three measures: the number of cases exported, the probability of a major epidemic, and the time delay to a major epidemic. Understanding the promen in the psychological consumer will be a key factor in achieving success, both for tourism researchers and for companies during and after the COVID-19 era (Kock et al., 2020). The epidemic brought the risk of death from infection, and unbearable psychological pressure, according to the following research. A survey of about 7,143 respondents found that 0.9% of respondents experience severe anxiety, 2.7% moderate anxiety and 21.3% mild anxiety (Cao et al., 2020).

The negative consequences of the pandemic on food safety and the service sector

Pandemic is not only healt problem. It is also economic threat to food security globally in the form of barrier, economic decline, restrictions on food trade etc (Touat & Tabani, 2020; Cvijanović et al., 2021b). An interesting study was done in the cases of 45 developing economies divided into three groups according to income level. Erokhin & Gao (2020) allegations the effects of COVID-19 food insecurity are more noticeable in higher economies than in the less developed countries. Many e-commerce companies rely on China for half of their commodity products. This deadly virus will seriously affect Malaysian online business, especially Chinese products (Hasanat et al., 2020). The change in the hotel business was caused by the decline in the performance of the tourism industry, in the midst of a pandemic.To continue business and profit from tourists, they have introduced online hotel reservations, airline tickets, online food ordering and package business services worldwide (Liew, 2020). Previous research on similar crisis situations shows similar patterns, and existing theories can very well explain current events in the gastronomic service disorder (Zenker & Kock, 2020). The process of research in the demand for gastronomic products by consumers requires attention, especially because food is a key motivating factor in choosing tourists for travel and destination (Čavić & Mandarić, 2021). The issue initiates a dialogue that encourages tourism scientists to study food tourism and offers practical and theoretical insight into the contextualization of this perennial and relevant phenomenon (Ying et al., 2020). Gastronomic tourism is also largely affected by the lack of travel. It is known that the experience of gastronomic

tourism is emotional and physical, because it involves tasting local food and participating in many activities in gastronomy. Some believe that pre-pandemic trends will return to normal and continue to develop. Three potential trends in food and beverage tourism have been identified, entitled "Back to Basics", "Evaluating Local and Local Populations" and "Food for Well-Being" (Fountain, 2021). Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte (2016), in their paper entitled "The Future of Food Tourism", they claim that food tourism is a valuable capital, but also a tourist product of the future. The current time of the pandemic, creates new consumers who seek to travel in search of exploration of gastronomic products and cultures. It is no secret that the tourism industry and culinary tourism have been greatly influenced by the extreme decline in international travel and changing demand. Destinations that promote gastronomic products should address innovations, and expand their existing offer to reflect in times of strong competition (Cvijanović & Pantić, 2021). For food tourism, the constraints it faced during the pandemic were a way to adapt and explore new possibilities in technology. Many catering companies need to consistently practice online marketing in response to external shocks during a pandemic (Milwood & Crick, 2021). Many have turned to social media to learn how to make their favorite dishes from home. Yuliari et al. (2020), claim that a gastronomic tourist attraction is an alternative or secondary tourist destination, which can be offered to tourists even during crisis situations. The use of modern online technology widely used in the food sector and in production sites is growing evidence of innovative concepts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Garibaldi & Pozzi, 2020). Based on the issues studied in the world, the authors set the following hypotheses:

H1: Factors have predictive power in determining the score on a criterion variable without a mediator
H2: Factors have predictive power in determining the score on a criterion variable with a mediator
H3: Full mediation has taken place – factors affect the criterion variable only through the mediator variable

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

The research was conducted in the period from March to June 2021, while the COVID-19 pandemic was still going on in the world and in Serbia. Visitors to several rural households in Serbia were interviewed. All visitors were locals, because the situation and restrictive measures during the

pandemic completely disrupted tourist movements, and it was impossible to see foreigners in the villages of Serbia. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, but due to the very small number of visitors, as well as their willingness to cooperate, a total of 225 complete questionnaires were collected, with all the answers. There was no need to translate the questions into English, due to domestic visitors. A total of 132 (58.7%) male and 93 (41.3%) female respondents participated in the study. Regarding the age of the respondents, the following was shown: a total of 24.9% of respondents were aged 18 to 30, then 34.2% aged 31 to 60, and 40.9% of them over 61 years of age. Of the total number of respondents, 40.4% have completed high school. A total of 40% of them with a university degree and only 19.6% with a high PhD degree. When observing the monthly salary of research participants, a total of 11.6% earns up to 200 euros per month. Then, 42.2% of them from 200 to 500 euros per month, and 39.1% of those who earn from 500 to 1,000 euros per month. There are the fewest respondents with a coat of more than 1,000 euros per month.

Measures and Statistical Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was used in the paper, as well as hierarchical factor analysis or higher order factor analysis. The aim of the higher order factor analysis is to obtain the desired number of factors that the authors considered more logical to further study the impact of these factors on the prediction of the criterion variable, which in this case was gastronomy as the future of Serbian tourism. Factor analysis is a set of mathematical-statistical procedures that allow a smaller number of variables to be determined in a larger number of variables, among which there is a connection. The beginning of the development of factor analysis is related to the works of Charles Spearman, from the beginning of the XX century. Factor analysis is used as a technique of statistical data reduction to explain the variability within the observed variables compared to a smaller number of unobserved random variables. Prior to the factorization procedure, the matrix of correlation coefficients needs to be subjected to a statistical significance test. The results of testing the assumptions of the suitability of the data for factor analysis using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett tests are presented. According to the previously described scale for grading the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index, acceptable parameters are as follows: about 0.90 - excellent; 0.80 - very good; about 0.70 - good, about 0.60 - mediocre, about 0.50 - bad, lower than 0.50 – unacceptable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). After the factor analysis, the authors approached the hierarchical multiple linear regression in order to determine which of the factors can best predict the score on the criterion variable of gastronomy as the future of Serbian

tourism. Regression analysis is a set of statistical methods that reveal whether there are connections between the observed phenomena and what they are in terms of shape and direction. Three factors were taken as predictors and mediator variable in this case factor COVID-19, to determine the influence of predictors before and after the introduction of mediators or one mediator in the action on the criterion variable. The mediator variable is the mechanism by which the predictor predicts the criterion (Baron & Kenny, 1986), explaining how and why the relationship is realized. If the connection between the predictor and the criterion can be fully explained by the mediator variable, ie if the predictor acts on the criterion completely only through the mediator, we are talking about complete mediation. We speak of partial mediation if the predictor has an effect on the criterion, both directly and indirectly, by acting on the mediator. For analysis and data processing, as well as for statistical models, the software SPSS, version 26.00 was used.

Results and Discussion

In the next paragraph, categorical variables (features) will be shown, through relative (%) frequency, while the central tendency of numerical features will be shown by arithmetic mean (m), and scattering by standard deviation (sd). It was determined that all variables were normally distributed, because the frequency distribution of numerical features was examined by indicators of distortion and courtesy. Given the normal distributions, parametric statistical models were used. The value of Cronbach's alpha is 0.927, which makes the questionnaire very reliable.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics for all items*

	m	**sd**
All the wishes of the gastronomic offer to tourists are being fulfilled	1.58	.759
General satisfaction with the gastronomic offer in the villages	1.86	.859
Providing assistance during the stay in rural households	1.97	.898
Timely response to dissatisfaction with the gastronomic offer	1.82	.879
Pleasant rural atmosphere	1.75	.803
Each guest is treated as an individual	2.18	.833
The hosts know a foreign language	1.10	.790
The hosts do the job properly	1.67	.850
The hosts provide all the information	2.03	.761
Hosts always present in rural households	1.62	.843
Organic garden food	1.69	.871

Fresh food	1.91	.757
Hosts know all the groceries	1.57	.794
Quality food	1.47	.694
Hygienic conditions satisfactory	1.56	.823
Homemade food is provided	2.84	.879
Homemade drinks are provided	2.25	.695
Rural furniture	1.45	.807
Rural interior	1.36	.634
Rural exterior	1.17	.480
Gastronomic product with a designation of origin	1.44	.724
Modern gastronomy is offered	1.20	.873
Preparing food on the spot	2.52	.598
The price indicates the quality of the food	1.79	.731
Present folk costume as marketing	1.81	.722
Animating tourists	2.04	.913
Tasting of local products	1.58	.884
The appearance of the food is satisfactory	2.05	.689
Different flavors present	2.43	.794

Source: *Author's research, *m=arithmetic mean; sd= standard deviation*

Table 1 lists all items that are grouped by exploratory factor analysis, and that speak of the average score and standard deviation for each item separately. It can be noticed that the highest average grade was taken by the item Food storage on the spot m=2.52 (sd=0.598). Then the following variables were highly rated: Each guest is treated as an individual (m=2.18), Domestic drinks (m=2.2.25; sd=0.695), Local food (m=2.84; sd=0.879), Animating tourists (m=2.04, sd=0.913), The appearance of the food is satisfactory (m=2.05; sd=0.689), and Different flavors are present (m=2.43; sd=0.794). Other items have a slightly lower level, which can be seen in the given table.

Since exploratory factor analysis uses correlations between variables, before starting the higher order factor analysis procedure, it should be checked whether the variables are correlated and for this purpose Bartlet's sphericity test is used (tests the null hypothesis that the matrix is intercorrelation of variables inserted into the identity matrix procedure equal to zero). The obtained value of 0.940 can be assessed as very good. The value of the Bartlett test for the statistical significance of the correlation matrix is $\chi 2=7156.469$, with degrees of freedom df=206 and p=0.00, which confirms the suitability of statistical processing of the collected data by factor analysis. In this study, 29 basic variables were reduced by exploratory factor analysis

to eight latent factors with properties greater than one, the values of which are shown in Table 2. Only factors greater than 1 are considered reliable, according to the Kaiser-Guttmann criterion. It can be seen from the previous table that this criterion in this case satisfies the first eight components, which cumulatively explain 85% of the variance.

Table 2: *Total Variance Explained*

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings[a]
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	6.765	23.329	23.329	6.765	23.329	23.329	5.851
2	5.242	18.074	41.403	5.242	18.074	41.403	5.350
3	3.624	12.497	53.900	3.624	12.497	53.900	2.929
4	2.786	9.606	63.506	2.786	9.606	63.506	4.305
5	1.966	6.779	70.286	1.966	6.779	70.286	3.007
6	1.670	5.759	76.044	1.670	5.759	76.044	2.494
7	1.544	5.323	81.367	1.544	5.323	81.367	2.508
8	1.038	3.578	84.945	1.038	3.578	84.945	2.524
9	.672	2.317	87.262				
10	.619	2.135	89.397				
11	.537	1.851	91.248				
12	.342	1.180	92.428				
13	.297	1.026	93.453				
14	.274	.943	94.397				
15	.227	.783	95.180				
16	.197	.680	95.860				
17	.185	.639	96.499				
18	.153	.527	97.026				
19	.148	.510	97.536				
20	.129	.445	97.981				
21	.110	.378	98.359				
22	.095	.329	98.688				
23	.087	.301	98.989				
24	.072	.249	99.238				
25	.057	.198	99.435				
26	.052	.181	99.616				
27	.045	.155	99.771				
28	.034	.118	99.890				
29	.032	.110	100.000				

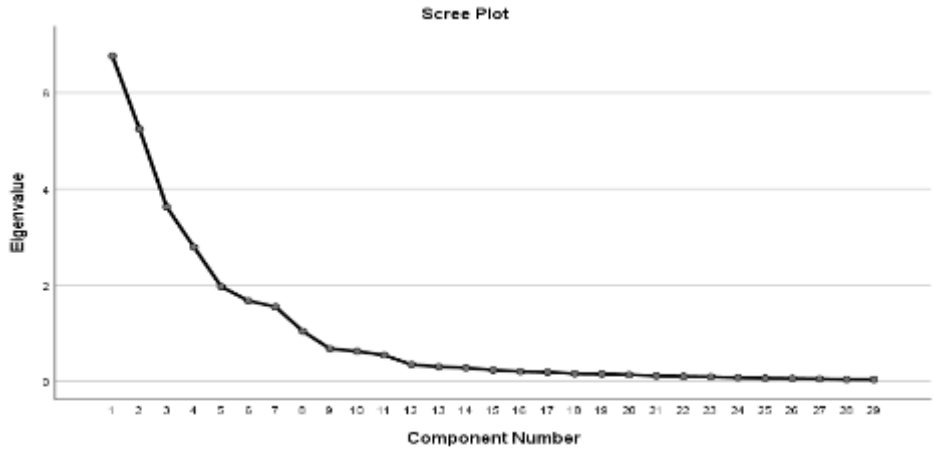
*Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

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

Source: *Author's research*

Eight factors were identified based on 29 characteristics. Variables that have little in common with other variables and have a small factor load (less than 0.30) according to all common factors are often called "independent variables". The factors that have the greatest impact (the greatest factor load) and cover the largest part of data variability, are factors for further study. The most common method used is the latent root criterion. According to this criterion, only those factors that have eugenvalues greater than 1 are taken into account. Factors that have less eugenvalues than 1 are considered irrelevant because they explain less variability than the variables themselves explain. The highest load lies on the first factor of 23.3%, which has the highest value in the explanation of manifest variables, while each subsequent one explains a smaller share in the total variance of 18.07%.

Figure 1: *Graphic representation of the obtained factors*



Source: *Author's research*

The graph represents the eigenvalues by factors. This graph is used to determine how many factors we want to keep and in principle the rule is that the "cut" should be made in the fold. As can be seen, according to the Scree plot, eight factors have been determined. The authors approached Hierarchical Factor Analysis or Higher Order Factor Analysis to identify three factors to make it easier to predict the criterion variable in the next model of multiple regression analysis.

Table 3: *Total Variance Explained*

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings[a]
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	6.765	23.329	23.329	6.765	23.329	23.329	6.071
2	5.242	18.074	41.403	5.242	18.074	41.403	5.996
3	3.624	12.497	53.900	3.624	12.497	53.900	3.877
4	2.786	9.606	63.506				
5	1.966	6.779	70.286				
6	1.670	5.759	76.044				
7	1.544	5.323	81.367				
8	1.038	3.578	84.945				
9	.672	2.317	87.262				
10	.619	2.135	89.397				
11	.537	1.851	91.248				
12	.342	1.180	92.428				
13	.297	1.026	93.453				
14	.274	.943	94.397				
15	.227	.783	95.180				
16	.197	.680	95.860				
17	.185	.639	96.499				
18	.153	.527	97.026				
19	.148	.510	97.536				
20	.129	.445	97.981				
21	.110	.378	98.359				
22	.095	.329	98.688				
23	.087	.301	98.989				
24	.072	.249	99.238				
25	.057	.198	99.435				
26	.052	.181	99.616				
27	.045	.155	99.771				
28	.034	.118	99.890				
29	.032	.110	100.000				

*Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

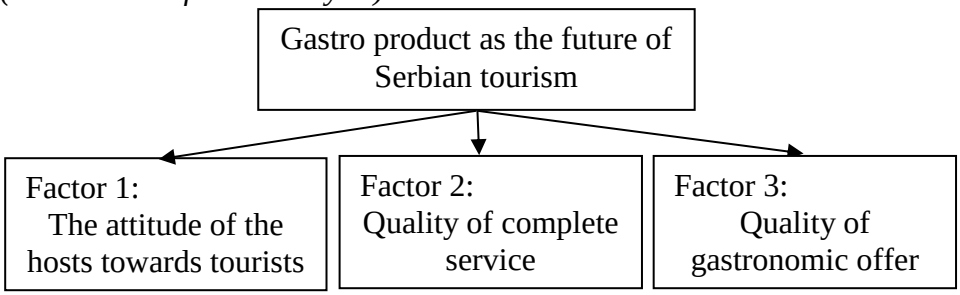
a. When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

Source: *Author's research*

In the first three columns (Initial Eigenvalues) are data for all factors. In the other three columns data are given (Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings) only for those factors that meet the criterion to be retained (here

it is inherent value over 1) and finally the eigenvalues of the rotated factors (because rotation was given). It can be noticed that there are now three factors, which cumulatively explain 54% of the variance. Less than when factor analysis identified eight factors, but a good percentage is still an explanation of variance, as it exceeds half of the sample explained. The first factor has the highest saturation 23.32%, the second 18.07% and the third factor 12.49%.

Figure 2: *Graphical presentation of higher order factual analysis (Hierarchical factor analysis)*



Source: *Author`s research*

The following factors have been identified and addressed as follows: Attitude of the host towards tourists, Quality of complete service, Quality of gastronomic offer. After determining the final number of factors, the authors approached a multiple regression analysis to determine whether these factors as predictors can, and to what extent, predict that the gastronomic product will be the future of Serbian tourism. As a mediator or mediating variable between predictors and criteria, the following variable was taken: the impact of COVID-19. The following tables will give the results of regression analysis and predictive power factors.

Table 4: *Model Summary*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.857[a]	.734	.730	.14338	.734	203.193	3	221	.000
2	.876[b]	.767	.763	.13455	.033	30.982	1	220	.000
a. Predictors: (Constant), Factor 1, Factor 2, Factor 3									
b. Predictors: (Constant), Factor 1, Factor 2, Factor 3, Mediator									

Source: *Author's research*

Table 4 shows an insight into the percentage of explained variance. R^2 shows that in the first model, before the introduction of the mediator, 73% explained the variance. After the introduction of the mediator, the percentage of explanations is slightly increased to 76%.

Table 5: *ANOVA*[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	12.532	3	4.177	203.193	.000[b]
	Residual	4.543	221	.021		
	Total	17.075	224			
2	Regression	13.093	4	3.273	180.815	.000[c]
	Residual	3.983	220	.018		
	Total	17.075	224			
a. Dependent Variable: Criterion variable: gastro product as the future of Serbian tourism						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Factor 1, Factor 2, Factor 3						
c. Predictors: (Constant), Factor 1, Factor 2, Factor 3, Mediator						

Source: *Author's research*

Table 5 indicates the statistical significance of the model. It can be noticed that both models are statistically significant, before and after the introduction of the mediator variable. In both models p=0.00. This indicates that the partial significance and share of each of these predictors can be further observed.

Table 6: *Coefficients*[a]

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model 1	B	Std. Error	Beta	*t*	*Sig.*
(Constant)	.833	.066		12.707	.000
Factor 1	.166	.016	.524	10.278	.000
Factor 2	.308	.014	.806	22.800	.000
Factor 3	.028	.016	.088	1.751	.041
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model 2	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.792	.062		12.778	.000
Factor 1	.151	.015	.476	9.793	.000
Factor 2	.287	.013	.751	21.689	.000
Factor 3	.026	.015	.083	1.754	.031
Mediator	.066	.012	.192	5.566	.000
a. Dependent Variable: gastro product as the future of Serbian tourism					

Source: *Author's research*

In the first model, it is noticed that all three factors have statistical significance. Factor 1: The attitude of the hosts towards the tourists, has statistically shown to be a significant predictor with a correlation of ß= 0.524. Factor 2: The quality of the complete offer also shows statistical significance in predicting the score on the criterion variable: p =0.00; ß=0.806. Factor 3: Quality of gastronomic offer has statistic significance of p=0.041, and correlation of predictors with criterion of ß=0.88. In the second model, when the mediator influence COVID-19 is introduced, it is noticed that the statistical significance of the first two factors remains the same, while the value of the third factor increases in favor of the higher statistical significance p=0.031. Here it is observed that the correlation is also positive in all factors. Which means that the quality of complete service, the attitude of the hosts towards tourists, and the quality of the gastronomic offer, with the passing of the pandemic, will increasingly predict the future of Serbian tourism. This is about partial mediation. Hypotheses H1 and H2 were confirmed, that the factors have a strong predictive power in determining the score on the criterion variable with and without the introduction of mediators, and H3 was denied because full mediation was not achieved. This means that the factors were significant in the prediction and without the mediator variable. If factors were important in anticipation only by introducing mediators, it would mean full mediation.

Conclusion

The World Tourism Organization estimates that due to the new corona virus pandemic, the volume of international tourism will 4% rise in international tourist arrivals in 2021 compared to 2020 (World Tourism Organization, 2021). The pandemic also brought some kind of good effect on domestic rural tourism. The largest percentage of tourists traveled to the villages of Serbia, as many as 90% of them. So far, generations born during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as those born after the 2000s, have become accustomed to digital technology and all its benefits. That is why they preferred to choose those tourist destinations that they will find through social networks and digital channels. After this crisis situation in the world, it is believed that the trend of healthy living and health in the future will have an even greater impact on tourist offers and the choice of rural tourism product. So far, this has been the case with many healing spas, but more often, mountains that are known for healthy air, ecologically arranged space and excellent medical treatment are becoming more important in this branch of tourism. It is logical that in the period of normalization, people

will continue to be worried about personal relationships, hygiene, fear of socializing in the crowd, gatherings, travel, staying indoors. It will take many years for the human psyche to accept the new normal state of life, which includes travel. Serbia is a country rich in rural areas, which has conditioned and given the opportunity to domestic tourists to visit all the rural beauties of the country. If this trend continues, it will bring the development of rural tourism and placement on the world and regional tourism market. Gastrotourism was recognized as a specific brand of Serbia, even before the pandemic. However, there is more global research on gastronomic products as products of the future. Authors of the paper conducted a survey on a total sample of 225 respondents, visitors to rural households in Serbia, during 2021. The results were processed in the SPSS software, version 26.00. Hierarchical exploratory factor analysis was performed in order to obtain the desired number of factors required for hierarchical regression analysis. The aim of this paper was to determine how much the obtained factors can predict the gastro tourism product as the future of rural Serbian tourism. A mediator, the influence of COVID-19, was also introduced to determine whether there is a change in the prediction of the criterion variable without the influence of COVID-19, or with the influence of COVID-19. Out of eight factors, three factors were obtained by hierarchical analysis, which were inserted into multiple regression analysis with mediation. Hypotheses have been confirmed that factors have a strong predictive power in predicting the score on the criterion variable with and without the influence of COVID-19. Respondents believe that the pandemic will not affect the change in the predictive power of factors. All factors showed statistical significance, but with the introduction of mediator, factor 3 gained greater statistical significance. It is about partial mediation, not full mediation.

The importance of research is reflected primarily in the perception of the importance of gastronomic tourism products in the villages of Serbia. During the pandemic, restaurants and other catering facilities brought new ways of serving through delivery and online ordering. This method enables work even during crisis situations. Gastronomy is certainly a specific brand of Serbia, and on the basis of this and similar research it will be possible to see the disadvantages and advantages, and implement strategic measures for long-term business and placement of gastronomic offer in the future of rural tourism in Serbia. It is necessary to secure a bigger position on the market in the country, and then abroad.

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