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Exploring rural tourism potential in rural areas of Vrnjačka Banja

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to examine the local populace's perceptions towards the possibilities and approaches of developing rural tourism in the rural areas of the Vrnjačka Banja municipality. The goal of the study is to contribute to the understanding of rural tourism development and the promotion of sustainable rural development while actively involving the local population. **Methodology** – The collected primary data underwent analysis employing descriptive statistics and factor analysis in IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. **Findings** – The analyzed results of the empirical research has shown that rural tourism in rural areas of municipality of Vrnjačka Banja can be developed by including local population. **Implications** – The research makes a theoretical contribution by enriching the discourse on the socio and economic prosperity of the community and tourism in rural areas. The practical implications of the paper involve contributing to the formulation future strategies for advancing rural tourism in municipality of Vrnjačka Banja. Moreover, the paper can serve as a basis for future improvements in effective rural tourism management and enhancement of the overall quality of life for the rural community in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality.

Keywords: rural tourism, tourism destination, local population perceptions, Vrnjačka Banja
JEL classification: Z32, L26, Q13

Istraživanje potencijala za razvoj ruralnog turizma u ruralnim područjima Vrnjačke Banje

Sažetak

Svrha – Rad ima za cilj da ispita percepcije lokalnog stanovništva o mogućnostima i pristupima razvoja ruralnog turizma u ruralnim područjima opštine Vrnjačke Banje. Svrha ovog rada je da doprinese razumevanju razvoja ruralnog turizma i promociji održivog ruralnog razvoja uz aktivno uključivanje lokalnog stanovništva. **Metodologija** – Primarni podaci su analizirani korišćenjem deskriptivne statistike i faktorske analize u softveru IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. **Rezultati** – Analizirani rezultati empirijskog istraživanja pokazali su da se ruralni turizam može razvijati u ruralnim oblastima opštine Vrnjačke Banje uz

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uključivanje lokalnog stanovništva. **Implikacije** – Teorijski doprinos istraživanja služi socio-ekonomskom prosperitetu ruralne zajednice i obogaćuje diskurs o ruralnom turizmu. Praktične implikacije istraživanja se odnose na značaj dobijenih rezultata u izradi budućih strategija razvoja ruralnog turizma Vrnjačke Banje. Osim toga, rad može poslužiti kao osnova za buduća unapređenja efikasnosti menadžmenta ruralnog turizma i poboljšanje ukupnog kvaliteta života lokalnog stanovništva u ruralnim područjima opštine Vrnjačke Banje.

Ključne reči: ruralni turizam, turistička destinacija, percepcije lokalnog stanovništva, Vrnjačka Banja

JEL klasifikacija: Z32, L26, Q13

1. Introduction

The paramount industry driving rural community development today is tourism ([Milićević et al., 2023](#); [Puška et al., 2019](#)). As the 21st century began, rural tourism and other new forms of tourism were developed to meet the needs of contemporary tourists. Considering it offers serene surroundings for relaxation and the enjoyment of scenic beauty, rural tourism becomes a pleasant and convenient choice for tourists as well as a promoter of rural development. Furthermore, the development of rural tourism as a central force for the development of rural communities reflects a broader prevailing phenomenon in the 21st century. Contemporary tourists seeking respite from the fast pace of cities are increasingly attracted to the authenticity and tranquility that rural destinations offer. The experience offered by rural tourism goes beyond traditional attractions and embraces a deep connection with nature, local culture and sustainable practices.

The growing desire for tourism services within rural areas empowers community members to generate income through product sales and service provision ([Nedeljković et al., 2022](#); [Puška et al., 2021](#); [Sanagustin Fons et al., 2011](#)). In the sphere of tourism development, the local populace assumes a vital role as essential stakeholder. In order to formulate a strategy and policy geared towards tourism competitiveness and ensure the sustainable growth of the tourist destination, it is essential to include the perceptions and attitudes of the community regarding tourism ([Milićević et al., 2020](#); [Papastathopoulos et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, the symbiotic connection between tourism and the rural economy goes beyond income generation. By actively involving residents in supplying products and services to meet tourism needs, community pride and identity are nurtured.

The study area of this paper is Vrnjačka Banja. Vrnjačka Banja is a spa tourism destination and municipality located in the Raška District of central Serbia. The urban area of Vrnjačka Banja has 10,065 inhabitants, whereas with the population of the surrounding villages of Vrnjačka Banja included, the total number is 27,527 inhabitants ([Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022](#)). The Vrnjačka Banja municipality has one urban and thirteen rural settlements ([Municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, 2024](#)). The paper aims to explore how the local population perceives the possibilities and approaches to advancing tourism in the rural zones of Vrnjačka Banja municipality. Also, the study seeks to contribute theoretically by enhancing discussions about the socio-economic well-being of rural communities and rural tourism, as rural communities are one of the crucial stakeholders in developing this form of tourism.

2. Theoretical framework

Rural tourism has been a topic of interest to numerous authors in recent years and represents a common name for various activities outside of cities and places where mass tourism has developed (Borović et al., 2022; Cvijanović & Ružić, 2017). An essential element in the affirmation and promotion of this kind of tourism is the local community's involvement, which is the focus of rural tourism (Crăciun et al., 2022). It has been believed that developing rural tourism can help the local population by fostering social and economic growth (Fang, 2020). Tourism within rural locales connects the economic, wider social and ecological elements of development. At the same time, it contributes positively to employment and the advancement of rural regions (Dimitrijević et al., 2022). According to Fleischer and Pizam (1997) "many studies show that rural tourism makes an important contribution to the local economy" (p. 368). Rural tourism encompasses "a sphere of double interests: native population (hosts) on the one hand and tourists (guests) on the other hand" (Paresishvili et al., 2017, p. 345).

According to OECD (2020) rural areas, given their essential nature and fundamental differences from urban areas, demand distinct interventions and policies tailored to enhance the income of their populations. Rural tourism has the potential to enhance the development of rural regions by elevating the quality of life for their residents (Njegovan et al., 2015). Dimitrovski et al. (2021) point out that certain researches have shown that tourism in rural areas develops spontaneously, without adequate strategic development elements, while Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000) state that the efficacy of such growth strategies receives limited attention to establish local jobs and generate income. Today's rural tourists are looking for destinations that have natural beauty and diverse tourism products and that have the ability to provide authentic and transformative experiences (Li et al., 2020). It is precisely rural tourism that stands out as a specific form of tourism, which, in addition to other benefits, can enable this type of transformation. There is an increasing need for tourism destinations to motivate their residents to participate in the development and improvement of the tourist offer. The burgeoning interest of urban dwellers in rural areas has catalyzed the growth of rural tourism but rural revitalization not only embodies the requirement to satisfy rural residents' aspirations for a better life but also plays an integral role in enabling rural residents to better enjoy the "policy dividends" of rural revitalization (Brouder et al., 2015; Zhongwei & Ang, 2022).

The inception of research on the local population's perspectives regarding the impact of tourism dates back to 1970s (Kuvan & Akan, 2005). The analysis and understanding of the local population's stance on tourism development is crucial for the success of any tourism type (Blešić et al., 2015). A lot of research has been conducted to examine the attitudes residents and their perception of the possibilities of developing rural tourism and the benefits of this development aimed at enhancing the quality of rural life (Abdollahzadeh & Sharifzadeh, 2014; Andriotis & Vaughn, 2003; Ap, 1992; Blešić et al., 2015; Chang et al., 2018; Kuvan & Akan, 2005; Látková & Vogt, 2012; Muresan et al., 2016; Podovac et al., 2019; Remoaldo et al., 2017; Scutariu & Scutariu, 2023; Verbole, 2000; Wilson et al., 2001). Látková and Vogt (2012) state that, although research indicates a connection between the population's perception and economic benefits as well as their support for tourism, there is also a need to establish theoretical frameworks. Residents recognize that tourism development leads to job creation, improves living standards, and boosts demand for local products (Scutariu & Scutariu, 2023).

Podovac et al. (2019) state that residents drive rural tourism by selling agricultural products to tourists and providing accommodation in their homes. Incorporating the views of the local population forms the foundation for supporting tourism (Chang et al., 2018). Ap (1992)

states that acknowledging tourism's role in rural community development has sparked heightened interest in examining its impacts, both positive and negative, on residents' perceptions. Numerous studies indicate that residents' satisfaction with tourism's impact significantly influences their perceptions and attitudes. The support from residents and the attitudes of individuals working in tourism significantly shape how tourists are treated and their overall impressions of the destination. (Wilson et al., 2001). The results of the study of Abdollahzadeh and Sharifzadeh (2014) show that residents value tourism in a way that is consistent with social exchange theory. Host community attitudes are favorable when perceived benefits outweigh perceived impacts, creating a positive social exchange (Andriotis & Vaughn, 2003). Based on case studies conducted in Slovenia, the author Verbole (2000) came to the conclusion that communities do not have the same attitude towards the development of rural tourism, because not everyone benefits equally from its development. Lane (1994) states that for rural tourism, it is of great importance that local communities control it. Rural tourism development is increasingly perceived as an opportunity for the development of rural communities (Long & Lane, 2000).

3. Materials and methods

The research focuses on analyzing the potential and methods for developing rural tourism within rural areas in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality. The paper aims to examine the perceptions of the residents with regard to the possibilities and approaches for the development of rural tourism in this municipality.

Based on the defined subject and research aim, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: Rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality can be developed by engaging the local population in the production and sale of agricultural products.

H₂: Rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality can be developed by engaging the local population in the provision of accommodation services for tourists.

H₃: Rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality can be developed through the organization of traditional village events.

H₄: The involvement of tourists in the daily activities of the local population is an important factor for rural tourism development in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality.

The empirical research was conducted using an anonymous questionnaire in June and July 2023. The questions were formulated relying on the previous study Podovac et al. (2019), which dealt with the analysis of rural tourism in the function of improving the quality of life of the population of the Goč Mountain, which is located in the immediate vicinity of Vrnjačka Banja. The survey questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first part comprised five questions relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second part consisted of eleven questions and refers to the assessment of the current state of the individual elements of the rural tourist offer of Vrnjačka Banja and the degree of involvement of the local population in the development of rural tourism. The third part contains twenty statements on the approaches to the development of rural tourism in the rural areas of the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, with an emphasis on the involvement of the local population.

A convenient sample was used and a total of 200 people completed an online survey questionnaire, but only 193 respondents met the basic condition that they live within the territory of the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja (Vrnjačka Banja, Otroci, Vukušica, Vraneši,

Vrnjci, Goč, Gračac, Podunavci, Lipova, Štulac, Rsavci, Ruđinci, Novo Selo, Stanišinci). The answers of respondents were examined and presented in the paper. The data was processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics and factor analysis, with IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The respondents of the survey were 71.5% female (138) and 28.5% male (55). The most of respondents (36.8%) belong to the 26-35 age group, while the least respondents (5.7%) are over 55 years old. As per the *level of education*, most of respondents have a *college degree* (33.7%) and *high school diploma* (31.1%), while the 2.1% of respondents have a *PhD*. In terms of *employment status*, the 71% of respondents are *employed* while the 3.1% of respondents are *retired*. Even 92.7% of the respondents agreed that the Vrnjačka Banja municipality has the potential for the development of rural tourism (Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents

		F	%	SD
Gender	Male	55	28.5	0.452
	Female	138	71.5	
Age	20-25	60	31.1	1.169
	26-35	71	36.8	
	36-45	30	15.5	
	46-55	21	10.9	
	More than 55 years	11	5.7	
Level of education	High school	60	31.1	1.161
	College	65	33.7	
	Faculty	26	13.5	
	Master	38	19.7	
	PhD	4	2.1	
Professional status	Unemployed	20	10.4	0.620
	Employed	137	71.0	
	Student	30	15.5	
	Retired	6	3.1	
Does the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja have potential for the development of rural tourism?	Yes	179	92.7	0.260
	No	14	7.3	

Source: Authors' research

In the latter section of the questionnaire, participants assessed the present condition of individual elements of the rural tourism offer in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality, by using a 5-point Likert scale. Based on the data, it could be concluded that the average rating of the elements of the offer of rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality ranges from 3.21 to 3.96. The aspects garnering the most favorable ratings include *natural beauty* (M=3.96), as well as *hospitality of the local population* (M=3.95). Conversely, *preserving rural areas* (M=3.21) and *sports-recreational offerings* (M=3.26) receive comparatively lower ratings, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: The quality of elements of the offer of rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality

Elements of rural tourism offer	Very bad	Bad	Average	Very good	Excellent	M	SD
	%	%	%	%	%		
Natural beauties	3.6	6.7	19.2	30.1	40.4	3.96	1.094
Cleanliness	6.7	10.4	35.8	30.1	17.1	3.40	1.095
Preservation of rural areas	7.3	16.1	34.7	31.6	10.4	3.21	1.067
Peace and quiet	6.2	14.5	24.9	31.6	22.8	3.50	1.173
Cultural and historical heritage	2.6	10.4	32.1	31.6	23.3	3.62	1.033
Number and quality of restaurants	6.2	14.5	24.9	30.6	23.8	3.51	1.181
Quality and variety of gastronomic specialties	5.7	13.0	29.0	28.5	23.8	3.51	1.155
Volume and quality of accommodation offer	6.2	6.7	17.6	33.2	33.6	3.86	1.164
Sports and recreational offer	6.7	17.6	31.6	30.1	14.0	3.26	1.113
Traffic availability	6.2	7.8	25.4	38.3	22.3	3.62	1.101
The hospitality of the local population	3.1	3.6	19.7	42.0	31.6	3.95	0.969

Source: Authors' research

The third part of the questionnaire refers to the perceptions of approaches to the tourism development in the rural areas of the Vrnjačka Banja municipality. Employing a 5-point Likert scale respondents expressed their agreement/disagreement with the offered statements. The majority of participants believe that the rural tourism offerings can be enhanced by *financial and institutional backing from local authorities in order to bolster agriculture and tourism – S3 (M=4.47)*, as well as by *increased use of agricultural produce in creating culinary experiences for tourists – S7 (M=4.47)*. Besides this, the results suggest that the residents can primarily contribute to the rural tourism development by *supplying catering establishments with agricultural products – S14 (M=4.53)*, as well as by *producing and selling agricultural products to tourists – S13 (M=4.48)* (Table 3).

Table 3: Perceptions of approaches to the development of rural tourism in the rural areas of the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja

Statements	Completely disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Completely agree	M	SD
	%	%	%	%	%		
S1 – Enhancement and development of sports, recreational, and entertainment offerings for tourists	0.5	3.1	14.0	40.4	42.0	4.20	0.832
S2 – By raising the level of understanding and education of the residents about the importance of rural tourism	0	4.7	13.0	28.5	53.9	4.31	0.871

S3 – Financial and institutional backing from local authorities in order to bolster agriculture and tourism	1.0	3.1	7.3	24.9	63.7	4.47	0.841
S4 – By developing sustainable rural tourism (tourism development that doesn't endangers economic, socio-cultural and ecological development of destination)	0.5	3.6	17.1	30.1	48.7	4.22	0.895
S5 – By integrating the offer of rural areas with the entire tourist offer of Vrnjačka Banja	0.5	1.0	12.4	26.4	59.6	4.43	0.788
S6 – By involving local population in agriculture production	2.1	6.2	15.5	28.0	48.2	4.13	1.028
S7 – Increased use of agricultural produce in creating culinary experiences for tourists	1.0	2.1	6.7	28.5	61.7	4.47	0.797
S8 – By improving the quality of existing and building new accommodation facilities for tourists	4.1	4.7	17.1	31.6	42.5	4.03	1.077
S9 – By employing the local population in offering accommodation for tourists	2.1	3.1	10.9	28.5	55.4	4.32	0.935
S10 – By including tourists in the daily activities of the local population	4.7	6.7	16.1	31.6	40.9	3.97	1.124
S11 – By organizing traditional authentic manifestations	1.0	3.1	8.3	28.5	59.1	4.41	0.850
S12 – Incorporating fishing and hunting as supplementary tourist offer	5.2	8.3	17.1	26.4	43.0	3.93	1.184
S13 – Selling agricultural products to tourists	0.5	0.5	9.3	29.5	60.1	4.48	0.729
S14 – By supplying catering establishments with agricultural products	0.5	0	9.3	25.4	64.8	4.53	0.706
S15 – By providing accommodation services within households of the local population	2.1	2.6	17.6	21.2	56.5	4.27	0.980
S16 – By providing tourists with activities such as: picking mushrooms, plants,	2.6	3.6	18.7	26.4	48.7	4.15	1.017

and forest fruits with an expert local guide							
S17 – By active participation of tourists in agricultural work	7.3	6.7	21.8	24.9	39.4	3.82	1.229
S18 – By organizing attractive manifestations (gastronomic manifestations, rural manifestations)	0.5	1.0	9.3	30.1	59.1	4.46	0.749
S19 – By teaching local people about old authentic trades that can be part of rural tourism offer	1.0	2.1	16.6	24.9	55.4	4.31	0.894
S20 – With the opening of an ethnic restaurant	2.1	0.5	12.4	22.8	62.2	4.42	0.881

Source: Authors' research

4.2. Factor analysis

Factor analysis was undertaken to group the twenty statements from the study and highlight observable factors. Factor analysis was used in conjunction with Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) to provide complementary information regarding the validity and reliability of the scales. According to Melović (2022), factor analysis looks for "a pattern of relationships between a large number of variables" (p. 16). In this research, factor analysis was applied with the aim of grouping a significant amount of independent variables (findings) into factors. The authors Gašević et al. (2017) point out that factor analysis is applied to group a large number of variables into a smaller number of variables. According to Pallant (2006), one of the three main steps that factor analysis consists of is the test of the justification of the application of factor analysis – the Kaiser-Meier-Olkin indicator of sample adequacy and Bartlett's test, which was applied in this paper. Using Kaiser-Meier-Olkin-KMO and Bartlett's Test as well as the factor analysis, the conclusion is reached that the results obtained validate the use of factor analysis since the measure of KMO (0.892) exceeds the lower threshold. A statistically significant correlation exists between the variables because Bartlett's sphericity test showed a statistical value ($p=0.000$) (Table 4). Based on the correlation matrix, where correlation coefficients exceed 0.3 and there are no signs of multicollinearity (no values greater than 0.7), the use of factor analysis is justified (Pallant, 2006).

Table 4: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.892
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1979.261
	Df	190
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Authors' research

Through further processing and factor extraction by employing the principal component analysis method, five factors that explain 67.01% of variance were identified (Table 5). To simplify factors interpretation Oblimin rotation was used. At the end, the factors are named, taking into account the level of correlations and the sign of the loading (Penić, 2016).

Table 5: Factor extraction using the method of principal components

Total Variance Explained						
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Total	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	8.079	40.396	40.396	8.079	40.396	40.396
2	1.833	9.166	49.561	1.833	9.166	49.561
3	1.363	6.814	56.375	1.363	6.814	56.375
4	1.066	5.332	61.707	1.066	5.332	61.707
5	1.061	5.305	67.012	1.061	5.305	67.012
6	0.859	4.296	71.309			
7	0.752	3.762	75.070			
8	0.680	3.402	78.472			
9	0.598	2.989	81.461			
10	0.517	2.583	84.044			
11	0.465	2.325	86.368			
12	0.428	2.142	88.511			
13	0.410	2.050	90.561			
14	0.359	1.797	92.358			
15	0.333	1.665	94.023			
16	0.307	1.537	95.560			
17	0.266	1.331	96.891			
18	0.226	1.131	98.021			
19	0.205	1.026	99.048			
20	0.190	0.952	100.000			

Source: Authors' research

Based on the results displayed in Pattern Matrix (Table 6), that two variables are excluded from further analysis as their factors loadings are below 0.5: S4 – *developing sustainable rural tourism (tourism development that doesn't endanger economic, socio-cultural and ecological development of destination)* and S5 – *by integrating the offer of rural areas with the entire tourist offer of Vrnjačka Banja*. It is concluded that the first factor has the highest factor loadings for the variables that describe that the local population of Vrnjačka Banja can be involved in the rural tourism development in rural areas of this municipality through *enhancement and development of sports, recreational, and entertainment offerings for tourists* – S1 (0.817), *by raising the level of understanding and education of the local residents about the importance of rural tourism*— S2 (0.775), *financial and institutional backing from local authorities in order to bolster agriculture and tourism* – S3 (0.534) so this factor can be named **Stakeholder inclusion and community awareness in rural tourism development** ($\alpha=0.717$). The second factor has the highest factor loading for the variables that indicate that the local population can be involved in rural development by being involved in *agricultural production* – S6 (0.753), *increased use of agricultural produce in creating culinary experiences for tourists* – S7 (0.632), *improving the quality of existing and building new accommodation facilities for tourists* – S8 (0.609) and *employing the local population in offering accommodation for tourists* – S9 (0.500), so this factor can be named **Community involvement in accommodation and agricultural products for rural tourism advancement** ($\alpha=0.743$).

The third factor has the highest factor loading for the variables that show that rural development can be achieved by *including tourists in the daily activities of the local population* – S10 (0.898), and *organizing traditional authentic manifestations* – S11 (0.620), and this factor can be named **Involvement of tourists in community activities and local traditional events** ($\alpha=0.660$). The fourth factor has the highest factor loading for variables that show that rural development can be achieved by *incorporating fishing and hunting as supplementary tourist offer* – S12 (0.800), *selling agricultural products to tourists* – S13 (0.795), *supplying catering establishments with agricultural products* – S14 (0.676), *providing accommodation services within households of the local population* – S15 (0.642) and *providing tourists with activities such as: picking mushrooms, plants, and forest fruits with an expert local guide* – S16 (0.631), and this factor can be named **Promoting rural tourism through active participation of tourists and locals in activities concerning local natural assets** ($\alpha=0.745$). The fifth factor has the highest factor loading for the variables indicating that rural development can be achieved by *active participation of tourists in agricultural work* – S17 (0.751), *organizing attractive manifestations (gastronomic manifestations, rural manifestations)* – S18 (0.745), *by teaching local people about old authentic trades that can be part of rural tourism offer* – S19 (0.717) and *with opening of the ethno-restaurant* – S20 (0.615), therefore this factor can be named **Traditional values revival via tourism events and offerings** ($\alpha=0.714$). (Table 6). Looking at the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each factor, the reliability of the scales is considered satisfactory ($\alpha > 0.7$), with the exception of the third factor, where the alpha value indicates almost satisfactory reliability.

Table 6: Pattern Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5
S1	0.817				
S2	0.775				
S3	0.534				
S4					
S5					
S6		0.753			
S7		0.692			
S8		0.609			
S9		0.500			
S10			0.898		
S11			0.620		
S12				0.800	
S13				0.795	
S14				0.676	
S15				0.642	
S16				0.631	
S17					0.751
S18					0.745
S19					0.717
S20					0.615

Note: Values below 0.5 are excluded

Source: Authors' research

5. Discussions

Regarding the quality of rural tourism offerings, the participants rated the *natural beauty* as well as the *hospitality of the local population* the highest, while the *sports and recreational offer* was rated the lowest. Conversely, the residents believe that the offer of rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality can be developed through the *financial and institutional backing from local authorities with the aim of bolster agriculture and tourism and with increased use of agricultural produce in creating culinary experiences for tourists*, while the residents involved in the rural tourism can include *the supply of catering facilities with agricultural products and selling agricultural products to tourists*. The study by Maksimović et al. (2015, p. 163) describes that rural tourism offers a holistic experience that goes beyond natural and architectural beauty and allows visitors to engage in the distinctive culture and customs and way of life of local communities through personal contact, traditional hospitality and a deep connection with nature. Similar results were obtained in this research, where participants feel it is essential to involve visitors in the activities of the local population, such as traditional events, production, and sale of agricultural products, preparation of gastronomic specialties, and other daily activities of the local community. In the study of Remoaldo et al. (2017) conducted in Boticas-Portugal, the results show that residents and stakeholders believe that the rural tourism development can achieve local and regional competitiveness by achieving economic development. Also, two main structural factors of tourism development were identified: religion and tradition, as well as culture and sport. According to the results of this research, the quality of sports and recreational equipment is rated the lowest. The results of the study conducted by Muresan et al. (2016) indicate that in the North-West Region of Romania, the development of rural tourism is viewed positively by the local population, because they are conscious of the advantages, such as employment and welfare increase. Also, the results of this study and findings about residents' attitudes toward tourism development lead to the conclusion that tourism development improves the quality of life of residents due to its effect on economic development of the area, which in turn leads to new employment opportunities. An interesting finding of the research is that the residents of Vrnjačka Banja included in this research have mostly secondary or higher education, which could be related to their prevailing belief that raising understanding and educating the residents about the importance of rural tourism development (S2) is essential for the advancement of rural tourism in the region.

The research in this paper, as mentioned above, was conducted based on previous research by the authors Podovac et al. (2019) who were engaged in the analysis of rural tourism in the function of improving the quality of life of the residents of Goč Mountain. A similarity can be observed in terms of the results obtained. Namely, when it comes to the possibility of developing rural tourism on Goč Mountain, the residents of Vrnjačka Banja believe that this mountain has potential for the rural tourism. Based on the research conducted in this paper, the local population of Vrnjačka Banja believes that the villages within the Vrnjačka Banja municipality have the potential for this type of tourism. The results obtained by the research of the authors Podovac et al. (2019), are also similar to the research of this paper regarding the level of involvement of the residents of Vrnjačka Banja in the development of rural tourism within the territory of the municipality.

In this study, factor analysis unveiled five influential factors based on conducted research on rural tourism development in rural areas of the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja: (1) Stakeholder inclusion and community awareness in rural tourism development, (2) Community involvement in accommodation and agricultural products for rural tourism advancement, (3) Involvement of tourists in community activities and local traditional events, (4) Promoting rural tourism through active participation of tourists and locals in activities

concerning local natural assets, (5) Traditional values revival via tourism events and offerings. Drawing from the findings of the study, the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja shows significant potential for the rural tourism, with 92.7% of respondents affirming this view. Additionally, respondents highlighted the natural beauty of the rural areas in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality and the hospitality of the local population, which can be used as key factors in promoting rural tourism. Based on the results of descriptive statistics, the following research hypotheses were confirmed:

- H₁: Rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality can be developed by engaging the local population in the production and sale of agricultural products (M_{s6}=4.13; M_{s7}=4.47; M_{s13}=4.48; M_{s14}=4.53);
- H₂: Rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality can be developed by engaging the local population in the provision of accommodation services for tourists (M_{s8}=4.03; M_{s9}=4.32; M_{s15}=4.27);
- H₃: Rural tourism in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality can be developed through the organization of traditional village events (M_{s11}=4.41; M_{s18}=4.46);
- H₄: The involvement of tourists in the daily activities of the local population is an important factor for rural tourism development in the Vrnjačka Banja municipality (M_{s10}=3.97; M_{s17}=3.82);

6. Conclusions

Rural tourism is fundamental for both economic growth and the preservation of culture. Involving the residents in the rural tourism of the Vrnjačka Banja municipality would ensure authenticity and community empowerment. Local knowledge is important in creating experiences that highlight the uniqueness of the region while respecting its environment and traditions. This collaboration fosters a sense of pride and ownership among locals and enriches the overall tourist experience.

Limiting factors of the research are reflected in the small sample of respondents. The exclusion of tourists from this research is another limitation, as their perspectives play a pivotal role in shaping rural tourism. In addition to examining the perception and attitudes of residents and the carriers of the tourist offer, it is of great importance to examine the perception of other interested parties for the development of rural tourism in Vrnjačka Banja municipality. Therefore, the obtained results leave room for further research. Future research can be conducted on a larger sample of respondents, including tourists and other stakeholders.

This research enriches the scholarly discourse on the socio and economic dynamics of rural communities and their interplay with rural tourism. The possibility of a future direction of research exists in terms of carrying out more detailed research and examination of the development of rural tourism starting from the identified factors from this research.

On a practical level, the paper recognizes unused potential in the rural areas of Vrnjačka Banja. It goes beyond mere identification by inspiring greater involvement from stakeholders, including residents. By emphasizing the significance of rural tourism and local community, the paper motivates informed decision-making, fostering a collaborative environment. This practical contribution lays the groundwork for sustainable rural tourism development in the region, benefitting both the community and those interested in its growth.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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