

YOUTHS ATTITUDES TOWARD GASTRONOMIC TOURISM IN TRANSYLVANIA REGION

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Abstract

Young tourists, accounting for nearly 23% of international arrivals, contribute significantly to global tourism social, cultural, and economic dimensions. While gastronomic tourism has gained prominence as a key component of cultural and experiential travel, existing research primarily focuses on adult travelers, neglecting young tourists' motivations and preferences. Additionally, much of the literature emphasizes international food tourism, neglecting the potential of domestic gastronomic travel. Given its role in preserving culinary heritage and stimulating local economies, understanding youth perceptions of gastronomic tourism is important.

The study surveyed 154 young adults (ages 18–29) from Transylvania to examine their travel habits and interest in gastronomic tourism. Findings reveal a strong preference for authentic local cuisine, with culinary experiences significantly shaping destination appeal. Many respondents showed high awareness of food-related travel and actively sought local culinary activities. Social aspects, such as shared meals and food festivals, emerged as important motivators. Interactive experiences like cooking workshops also stood out.

Gastronomic tourism shows strong potential to attract young travelers and enhance Transylvania's appeal. Raising awareness and educating youth can boost participation. Local tourism providers can leverage this by offering distinctive, high-quality culinary experiences, deepening the connection between local food culture and travel motivations among young adults.

Key words: *gastronomy, motivations, perceptions, tourism, youths.*

JEL Classification: *Z32, L83, D91.*

I.INTRODUCTION

Gastronomic tourism, a concept rooted in the works of Finkelstein (1989) and (Bessière 2001), which highlighted the profound influence of dining experiences on tourists' perceptions and emotional connections to a destination, has evolved significantly over past decades. These early studies emphasized that the sensory and cultural dimensions of food consumption during travel not only shape tourists' preferences but also serve to enrich cultural experiences. Over time, this concept has been extensively explored and refined, leading to the integration of gastronomic tourism as a strategic tool for destination branding, economic growth and cultural preservation. In response to growing competition within the global tourism industry, destinations and tourism service providers must innovate and differentiate themselves using culinary heritage. Today, gastronomy is not only a key element in tourism promotions and destination management, but also a

vital component of cultural identity, allowing destinations to craft unique and memorable experiences that set them apart in a saturated market. The global appeal of gastro-tourism continues to rise. According to the Culinary Tourism Market Report 2024 (Research and Markets 2024) the global culinary tourism market reached US\$ 946.4 billion in 2023. A comprehensive research study examining the tourism behavior of Generation Z travelers (European Travel Commission 2020) highlighted that a notable 75% of respondents identified the act of exploring locally produced food and beverages as the most prominent and appealing activity at their chosen travel destinations. This preference underscores the significance of culinary experiences in shaping the travel motivations and cultural engagement of this generation. In Romania, travelers beyond admiring unique landscapes, visiting popular destinations, and exploring tourist attractions, appreciate traditional dishes made with local and natural ingredients (Gheorghe, Tudorache and Nistoreanu 2014). Therefore, Romania has the potential to establish itself as a key player in the gastronomic tourism market, thanks to its rich culinary heritage and

distinctive local dishes. Transylvania stands out due to its well-defined culinary identity, making it a popular destination for those eager to experience its diverse and authentic traditional dishes. Romanians deeply respect their gastronomic traditions, viewing them as integral to their national identity. For them, food is more than sustenance, it is a celebration of culture and heritage, carefully prepared with rich ingredients and unique flavors.

While extensive research has examined the role of gastronomy in tourism, most studies focused on older demographics such as middle-aged or senior travelers, who are traditionally perceived as the primary market for food tourism. Furthermore, much of the existing literature emphasizes international gastronomic tourism, exploring factors that influence destination choice and the connection between gastronomy and travel decisions. However, limited attention has been given to younger travelers' attitudes and perceptions regarding gastro-tourism, particularly within domestic tourism contexts. This research gap is significant, as young travelers represent a growing and influential segment in the global tourism industry.

"Youth tourism," which refers to all tourism activities undertaken by individuals aged 15 to 29 (Horak and Weber 2000), has become significant on a global scale from social, cultural, and economic perspectives. According to the UNWTO, young travelers account for nearly 23% of global international arrivals, representing 296 million travelers and more than any other market segment, they are drivers of innovation and promoters of responsible tourism (WYSE Travel Confederation 2024). Research by WYSE reveals that young travelers are not only more likely to revisit destinations but also contribute greater long-term value. Their journeys offer cultural enrichment, and they actively engage with the communities they visit. For young people, travel is considered as an essential part of their lives—more than just a temporary escape, it is seen as a form of education and personal growth. This shift in perspective has profound implications for the destinations they explore, where the social and cultural impacts of youth tourism are increasingly outweighing the economic benefits.

However, their specific motivations, preferences and level of awareness regarding gastronomic tourism remain largely unexplored. Given their potential long-term impact on tourism industry in general, understanding their engagement with food tourism is essential for developing targeted strategies and enhancing the appeal of gastronomic experiences among this demographic. Therefore, this study aims to examine the preferences, motivations and perceptions of young adults regarding gastronomic tourism, with a particular focus on the gastronomic potential of Transylvania. Using a quantitative approach, this research identifies key factors influencing young travelers' participation in food-related tourism

activities, evaluate their level of awareness of available gastronomic experiences in Transylvania and provide insights into how local stakeholders can better promote culinary tourism to this segment. Thus, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of youth engagement in food tourism and offers valuable recommendations for tourism development and destination marketing.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourists primarily consume food during their stay out of necessity, as it fulfills a basic human need (Hjalager 2004). However, their attitudes toward food experiences and gastronomic tourism can vary significantly, allowing them to be categorized into two distinct groups. The first group comprises those who eagerly embrace culinary exploration, delighting in new tastes and cultural experiences. The second group, often referred to as "survivors" or motivated by "primitive instincts," tends to avoid unfamiliar cuisines, driven by a lack of curiosity or a fear of the unknown (González Santa Cruz, et al. 2020). Thus, visitors who explore and enjoy food from diverse cultures and countries contributed to a different type of tourism known as gastronomy or culinary tourism (Ellis, et al. 2018). Defined as travelling for the purpose of experiencing local cuisines, food tourism attracts enthusiasts, often referred to as foodies, who seek destinations where they can try native cuisines.

Gastronomic tourism is deeply tied to authenticity, which is inseparable from a destination's heritage, history, and culture (Ashleigh, et al. 2018). Beyond food, it encompasses traditions, stories, and symbols, offering tourists a cultural experience built around interaction and socialization. As Ashleigh et al. highlight, tourists play an active role in shaping their experiences by engaging in food-related activities and immersing themselves in the local culture. Typically, food tourism activities include shopping at local markets, attending food festivals, taking cooking classes, sampling street cuisine, and visiting breweries and wineries. Results from a study conducted by Ullah, et al. (2022), show that there is an increase in choosing a holiday based on the possibility of having gastronomic adventures at the destination. This means that food and culinary experiences are an essential part of a holiday destination which can significantly influence the decision-making process of tourists.

Many studies from the literature identified that tourists present different degrees of implication in the activities related to gastronomic tourism (Nistor and Dezsi 2022). For instance, Hjalager (2004) presents a phenomenological model of culinary tourism experiences, which categorizes tourists based on their attitudes and preferences toward food and eating. This model proposed four distinct groups: "recreational",

“existential”, “diversionary” and “experimental” gastronomy tourists. Each category reflects a unique way tourists interact with and value gastronomic experiences, ranging from causal enjoyment to deep, transformative engagement. Thus, *first hypothesis* established for this research was: *There is a positive correlation between young adults' familiarity with the concept of gastronomic tourism and their intention to travel to a destination for gastronomic experiences.*

When examining the differences in tourists' behavior concerning their level of immersion in gastronomic tourism activities, an important factor frequently identified and explored in various studies is tourism motivation. This concept plays a central role in understanding the diverse ways tourists engage with culinary experiences. Fields (Fields 2002) provides further insight into the motivations of gastronomic tourists, identifying four main categories: physical, cultural, interpersonal and prestige-driven motivations. First, physical motivation is the most fundamental and relates to the basic human need for nourishment. Cultural motivation, on the other hand, reflects the desire to explore a destination's identity through its cuisine, discovering local flavors, traditions and food preparation techniques. Interpersonal motivation stems from the social and communal aspects of food. In many cultures around the world, food serves as a means of bringing people together, whether it's through sharing a meal, socializing or simply spending time together over a dish. This cultural significance highlights food's role as a unifying force that fosters connections and shared experiences. The fourth category, prestige and status motivation, emphasizes the role of food experiences in enhancing an individual's social standing and personal identity. Engaging in unique or exclusive culinary activities – such as dining at renowned restaurants, participating in wine tastings, or mastering specific culinary knowledge – can elevate a tourist's sense of prestige and status. These experiences often serve not only as social markers but also as a way of accumulating cultural capital.

Tikkanen's findings (2007) align with and reinforce the significance of these factors in shaping gastronomic tourism behaviors. Building on this foundation, Dimitrovski and Crespi-Vallbona (2018) identified four additional motivational dimensions: engaging with local producers, sensory appeal, experiencing local food culture, and a focus on healthy eating. Subsequent other researchers (Castillo-Canalejo, et al. 2020) (Kim, Eves and Scarles 2013) have expanded on these motivations, highlighting other key drivers of gastronomic tourism. These include the desire to try new foods and beverages, enjoy leisure activities, explore market reputations, network with others, and simply escape the routines of daily life. Or even more detailed include nine overarching reasons why tourists seek out local cuisine: the pursuit of exciting experiences, the need to break away from

routine, the desire to gain knowledge, health consciousness, the search for authenticity, the opportunity for social bonding, the allure of appealing physical environments, sensory satisfaction, and the quest for prestige. Additionally, Sthapit, Piramanayayagam, and Björk (2020) identify key motivations for young adults in gastronomic tourism, including the desire to try something new, explore a culture through its cuisine, experience unique flavors, and the influence of word-of-mouth—a phenomenon described by Nyilasy (2006) as interpersonal communication about a product or service, where individuals share opinions with friends, acquaintances, or family members based on personal experiences.

In conclusion, a review of the motivational dimensions proposed in various studies reveals that five core motivations have emerged: sensory experiences, the excitement of new discoveries, social interaction, cultural exploration, and health benefits. These five categories formed the foundation for the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. The gastronomic motivations of young tourists can be categorized into five key dimensions.

Hypothesis 3. Youngsters who are willing to travel to a destination only to experience a certain food or beverage are influenced by the participation to gastronomic festivals.

When discussing young tourists' preferences for culinary offerings, Untaru and Ispas (2013) highlight a tendency among young adults to opt for fast food and unhealthy dishes, often disregarding ingredients and preparation methods. In contrast, Seočanac (2022) emphasizes the role of food festivals in boosting the appeal of gastronomic tourism and encouraging young adults to engage in culinary-related experiences.

Romanian cuisine emphasizes the use of locally sourced ingredients, with "diversity" being its defining characteristic. Influenced by the nation's history, geography, and cultural heritage, Romanian gastronomy reflects a fusion of Dacian, Celtic, Greek, Turkish, Russian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Serbian, and Austrian influences. Each region boasts distinct culinary traditions shaped by local ingredients and customs.

Transylvania holds immense potential for gastronomic tourism (Gheorghe, Tudorache and Nistoreanu 2014). While several initiatives promote the region's culinary heritage, many opportunities remain untapped. Notable efforts include gourmet festivals, food chains, and the integration of culture and gastronomy into regional development. Two key festivals—Transilvania Gastronomică and Transylvania Gourmet-Food Culture Festival—highlight the richness of Transylvanian cuisine, attracting both locals and international visitors. Similarly, the Taste of Transylvania Festival in Lunca de Jos aims to preserve and celebrate traditional

culinary heritage. Another significant initiative is Via Transilvanica, a 1,400 km hiking trail crossing seven historical and cultural regions. As noted by Nicula and Spănu (2019), this route plays a vital role in gastronomic tourism by featuring food chains that serve only locally sourced dishes, preserving authentic regional flavors.

Hypothesis 4. Youths who have already experienced gastronomic tourism in Transylvania are motivated to travel again in the region.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a structured online survey to collect data on youth attitudes and motivations toward gastronomic tourism. The survey was designed based on a previous review of the literature on tourism motivation, expectations and behavior in the context of gastronomic destinations. Prior to the definitive survey, a pre-test was carried out on 20 individuals in order to determine the validity of the questionnaire.

The target population consisted of individuals aged 18 to 30, ensuring a focus on youths' perspectives on gastronomic tourism. No stratification was applied based on a previous gastronomic tourism experience. A total of 172 answers were obtained, of which 154 were used. The rest were rejected due to improper completion. The rejection rate in the definitive survey was low and insignificant.

From a gender perspective, the study sample exhibited a well-balanced representation of both male and female respondents, ensuring a diverse and inclusive dataset. Beyond gender distribution, an essential factor in understanding the travel behavior of the young generation of tourists was the frequency of their tourism activities throughout the year. As illustrated in Fig.1, a substantial number of respondents reported engaging in frequent travel experiences, with a peak for at least three vacations annually.

The survey consisted of 43 questions divided into five sections. The questions were intended to give researchers an understanding of what youth already know about food tourism, whether they would be interested in doing so in Transylvania, and what kinds of activities they would like to experience more of. The variables that they intended to measure are related to the analysis of motivation, satisfaction, and socio-demographic characteristics. The first category was related to the respondents' profiles, having questions about their age, their gender, and the region they are from. The second category contains questions that fall into the category about their perception and behavior in their holidays with a perspective on the gastronomy sector. Further on, the third category was about the knowledge and perception about gastronomic tourism, which was followed by the last two categories: the one for the participants who are familiar with the

gastronomy and gastro-tourism from Transylvania, and the one for those who do not have current knowledge about it.

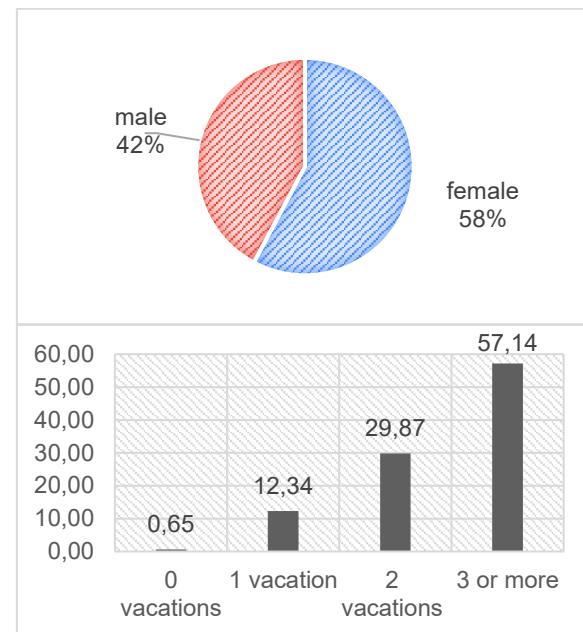


Figure 1 – Distribution of respondents by gender and number of vacations per year

A five-point Likert scale, with 5 being the highest score, was used to measure preferences and motivations. Also, multiple-choice and binary-response questions were included to evaluate past travel experiences and appeal toward some activities. Respondents were asked to select the top 5 out of 9 different food-related tourism activities that best align with gastronomic tourism in Transylvania. To measure past participation in gastronomic tourism, respondents were asked about their frequency of engagement. Data were coded in the following mode: "once", was considered a distinct category, being coded as "0", while any frequency above 1, was considered a broader group, being coded as "1".

Data were analyzed to assess statistical relationships and patterns, using Excel data analysis tool. The reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and results highlighted an acceptable level of the internal consistency of items, reinforcing the validity of the research work

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

First it is essential to highlight that 80% of the young respondents in the sample reported being familiar with the concept of gastronomic tourism (Fig.2). This high level of awareness provides a strong foundation for further exploring their perceptions and preferences regarding this specific type of tourism. Their gastronomic experiences also emerged as a key

aspect when discussing their overall travel activities, particularly in the context of their visits to Transylvania.

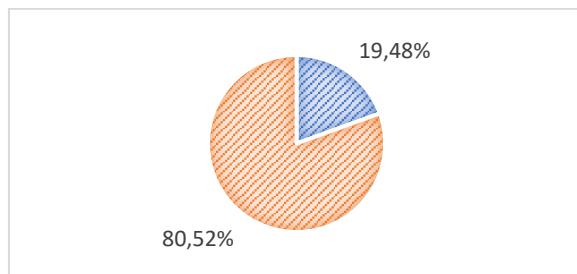


Figure 2 – Respondents ponder regarding familiarity with “gastronomic tourism” concept

Moreover, as illustrated in Fig.3, more than 70% of participants indicated that, during their travels to a destination, they perceive at least 40% of the food and beverages they consume as being representative of the local gastronomy. This finding underscores the significant role that regional culinary traditions play in shaping the overall travel experience for young tourists.

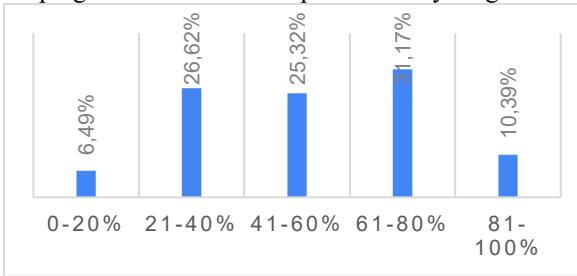


Figure 3 – Respondents' perception of how representative their consumed food during holiday is for the destination's cuisine

Regarding the willingness of young adults to travel for gastronomic experiences, 66.2% responded positively, stating they could imagine traveling solely for such experiences. To explore the factors influencing this willingness, a chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between familiarity with the concept of culinary tourism and the willingness to travel for gastronomic purposes among young respondents.

The analysis revealed (Tabel 1) a p-value below the common significance threshold of 0.05, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates a statistically significant association between having knowledge about culinary tourism and the willingness to engage in gastronomic travel. These findings emphasize the critical role of raising awareness and understanding of culinary tourism in motivating young individuals to pursue gastronomic tourism (H1 confirmed). Consequently, efforts to enhance education and knowledge about culinary tourism may foster greater participation in gastronomic travel within this demographic.

Table 1. Results of relationship between concept familiarity and willingness to travel

	familiar with the term "culinary or gastronomic tourism,"		Chi-Square test
	yes	no	
willingness to travel in a destination only for gastronomic experience	yes	90	12
	no	34	18

$\chi^2=10.05$; df= 1; p = 0.0015

To evaluate whether young travelers willing to visit a destination solely for a culinary experience also show an interest in gastronomic festivals—and whether such events serve as their primary motivation for food-driven travel—an ANOVA (One way) analysis was conducted. The results indicate that both the Fisher LSD and Dunnett's tests reveal a statistically significant difference between the "YES" and "NO" groups.

Specifically, the Fisher LSD test produced a very low p-value, confirming that the observed mean difference is statistically significant rather than a random variation. Similarly, Dunnett's test demonstrated a significant difference at a highly reliable level (p-value < 0.05). The computed difference of -0.7843 indicates that the mean value for the "NO" group is notably lower than that of the "YES" group, a finding consistently validated by both statistical tests.

Furthermore, the question regarding participants' willingness to travel solely for gastronomy was also analyzed in relation to another appealing factor—visiting a gastronomic heritage site. The results mirrored those observed for gastronomic festivals: both the Fisher LSD and Dunnett's tests demonstrated high significance, as evidenced by the very low p-value. This suggests a substantial and meaningful difference between the two groups, reinforcing the idea that youths willing to travel exclusively for gastronomy are significantly influenced by their interest in both gastronomic festivals and heritage-related culinary experiences.

Motivations

The findings from Tabel 2. reveal that the leading motivation for young travelers engaging in food-related experiences is the desire to share enjoyable moments with family and/or friends, with the peak mean score of 4.6. This emphasizes the crucial role of social interaction in shaping travel experiences. The average highest mean score (4.148) for social interaction further reinforces that young travelers particularly appreciate the opportunity to connect with others through culinary experiences. However, the moderate standard deviation (1.06) suggests that

individual preferences vary, with some travelers favoring more independent or private gastronomic encounters.

The strong appeal of discovering the flavors of local cuisine, which ranks as the second-highest motivation (mean score 4.28), emphasizes the fundamental role of novelty and exploration in gastronomic travel. These findings highlight that beyond simple nourishment, food serves as a gateway to cultural immersion, storytelling, and sensory adventure. The robust internal consistency observed within the novelty and experiential desire constructs suggests that travelers are not only driven by the act of tasting unfamiliar flavors but also by the experiential and participatory elements of food tourism.

The results further reinforce the idea that gastronomic tourism extends beyond simple food consumption, evolving into a multidimensional experience that links cultural engagement, learning, and social interaction. This is evidenced by the significant motivation to understand local culture through food (mean score 4.02) and the excitement of trying local specialties (mean score 3.97). These findings indicate that travelers seek not only indulge in diverse culinary traditions but also to gain insight into the historical, social, and cultural narratives embedded within regional cuisines.

By leveraging these perceptions, destinations can develop strategic initiatives that balance novelty-seeking behaviors with authentic cultural exchange. Story-driven dining experiences, immersive food trails, and collaborations with local chefs and artisans can further enhance the depth of engagement, ensuring that culinary tourism remains a powerful conduit for meaningful and memorable travel experiences.

Furthermore, understanding these nuances can help destination marketers and tourism operators design more targeted promotional strategies. Highlighting the social aspects of food-related experiences can attract those looking for communal engagement, while showcasing personalized and immersive opportunities can appeal to solo travelers or those seeking a quieter, more reflective culinary journey. By addressing these varying motivations, destinations can enhance their appeal to a broader spectrum of young travelers, ultimately enriching their gastronomic tourism offerings.

To ensure the reliability of the survey instrument measuring youth motivations toward gastronomic tourism, Cronbach's alpha analysis was employed. This statistical method evaluates the internal consistency of the items within each motivational construct, indicating how well they collectively measure the underlying concept. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each dimension of youth motivations such as novelty, taste exploration, experience desire, and social interaction—to confirm the reliability of the constructs within the gastronomic

tourism framework

Table 2. Gastronomy tourism motivations for youths

	Motivations to choose a destination for gastronomic experience	Rank	Mean score	Standard deviations	Cronbach's alpha score
<i>Social interaction</i> (mean 4.148)	j. Intention to share pleasant moments with family and/or friends	1	4.6	0.73	0.72
	k. Willingness to recommend local gastronomic experience to others	6	4.09	0.99	
	i. Opportunity to meet new people	9	4	1.06	
	l. Motivation to share my gastronomic knowledge with others	14	3.81	1.12	
<i>Novelty (mean 4.117)</i>	e. Curiosity to discover flavors of local cuisine	2	4.28	0.89	0.783
	f. Understanding local culture through food	7	4.02	0.92	
	a. Excitement to try local food	10	3.97	0.98	
<i>Taste exploration</i> (mean 4.048)	m. Local food tastes good	4	4.16	0.98	0.85
	g. Willingness to experiment new dishes	8	4.02	0.98	
	c. Desire to indulge in favorite dish	12	3.89	0.96	
<i>Experience desire</i> (mean 3.914)	d. Desire for a fun experience	3	4.27	0.93	0.71
	n. Visual appeal of local food	11	3.92	0.95	
	b. Culinary experiences different from usual consumption	15	3.74	1.05	
	h. Preference for enjoying a rural environment	16	3.63	1.09	

The threshold for acceptable reliability was set at 0.70, following established guidelines in psychometric research. Values exceeding this threshold were considered indicative of adequate internal consistency for motivational constructs.

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.905 for the set of motivations used indicates a good internal

consistency of the measurement instrument. This means that the items in the four selected categories reliably measure the same construct or characteristic, and the instrument is considered reliable for evaluating the subject in question.

Transylvanian gastronomic experience perception

An important objective of this research was to explore young people's perception of the gastronomic potential offered by the Transylvania region. In this regard, participants were asked about their travel history, specifically whether they had ever visited or spent a holiday in any part of Transylvania. The results revealed that 78.6% of respondents had visited Transylvania, highlighting the region's popularity among young individuals. To gain a more realistic view of the gastronomic tourism potential in Transylvania for young people, they were asked if they had the opportunity to experience local cuisine during their visit. Thus, among those who travelled to Transylvania, 81.8% reported having a gastronomic experience during their visit. These findings highlight the strong connection between tourism in Transylvania and the culinary experiences it offers, suggesting that the region holds substantial appeal for gastronomic tourism. Also reflects the significant proportion of respondents who reported familiarity with culinary tourism concepts. The fact that they had a gastronomic experience in Transylvania was an important foundation for evaluating their level of satisfaction with the culinary offerings available in the region. Therefore, the responses to the question "To what extent did you enjoy the food cooked in Transylvania?" carry significant weight in this assessment. Thus, resulted an important ponder of the youths who were very and extremely satisfied by their gastronomic experience in Transylvania (Fig. 4)

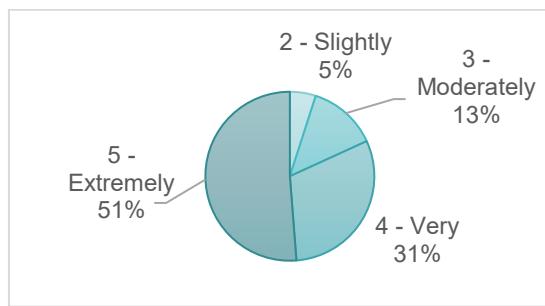


Figure 4 – Enjoyment Levels of Food Cooked in Transylvania

Given the favorable results regarding the gastronomic experience in this region, it was considered relevant to examine the correlation between this experience and young people's intention to revisit the region for gastronomic purposes, using a regression analysis of the responses.

Table 3. OLS Regression Results

Dep. Variable:	<i>Willingness_to_Travel in Transylvania</i>					
R-squared:	0.412					
Adj. R-squared:	0.409					
F-statistic:	97.03					
Prob (F-statistic):	2.28e-17					
Log-Likelihood:	-124.22					
No. Observations:	120					
AIC:	252.4					
BIC:	257.0					
Df Residuals:	118					
Df Model:	1					
Covariance Type:	nonrobust					
	coef	std err	t	P> t	[0.025	0.975]
Intercept	1.765	0.380	4.64	0.00	1.014	2.518
<i>Enjoyment_of_Transylvanian_Food</i>	0.586	0.059	9.85	0.00	0.469	0.703
Omnibus:	27.540				Durbin-Watson: 1.659	
Prob(Omnibus):	0.000				Jarque-Bera (JB): 44.017	
Skew:	-1.065				Prob(JB): 2.97e-10	
Kurtosis:	5.090				Cond. No. 11.3	

An important finding of this study is the significant positive relationship between the enjoyment of Transylvanian gastronomy and the willingness to travel to this region for its culinary experience and confirming H4. The regression analysis (Table 3) further strengthens this conclusion. The R-squared value of 0.412 indicates that 41.2% of the variability in willingness to travel is accounted for by enjoyment of food, highlighting the pivotal role of gastronomic pleasure in travel decisions. This aligns with previous research that has shown a strong connection between food-related enjoyment and travel motivations (Smith and Costello 2009); (Kim, Eves and Scarles 2013). These findings are consistent with the work of (Quan and Wang 2004), who also identified a significant relationship between culinary satisfaction and travel behavior. These results are consistent with previous studies that have emphasized the role of food in shaping travel preferences among younger demographics (Mak, Lumbers and Eves 2012) (Kivela and Crotts 2006).

This model is statistically significant, as evidenced by the F-statistics of 97.03 and a p-value well below 0.05 (2.28e-17), suggesting that the model is a good fit for the data. Moreover, the coefficients derived from the regression provide deeper insights. The intercept value of 1.7658, with a highly significant p-value (0.000), indicates a baseline willingness to

travel even for those with neutral enjoyment of food. The coefficient for enjoyment of food (0.5861) is also highly significant (*p*-value = 0.000), indicating that for every one-unit increase in the enjoyment of food, there is a corresponding 0.5861 increase in willingness to travel. This is in line with studies such as that by Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016), which highlighted the importance of culinary experiences in influencing travel decisions.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the analysis was conducted exclusively among participants who had previously traveled to Transylvania, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Despite this limitation, the study offers valuable insights into the influence of culinary enjoyment on travel behavior, emphasizing the importance of gastronomic experiences in the promotion of tourism in Transylvania. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on food tourism and can inform future research and tourism marketing strategies.

V.CONCLUSIONS

Results showed that most of the youngsters are familiar with the term gastronomic tourism and consider that local food is healthier and has a lot of fresh ingredients, which is a very good sign for the development of culinary tourism. The fact that young travelers who have had a culinary experience in Transylvania express a strong desire to revisit the destination—particularly to attend gastronomic festivals, participate in culinary events, and explore gastronomic heritage—highlights a crucial conclusion in general about young tourists' behavior. This finding suggests that a positive and satisfying culinary experience at a destination plays a crucial role in shaping young tourists' interest in gastronomic tourism, fostering a greater willingness to participate in gastronomic tourism. This conclusion carries even greater significance in the context of domestic tourism, as it indicates that young travelers are also highly motivated to engage in gastronomic tourism within their own country.

The high percentage of individuals engaging in gastronomic activities during their visits to Transylvania further reinforces the potential of

promoting culinary tourism to enhance the region's attractiveness, particularly among young travelers. Also, this suggests that the more tourists are exposed to and develop a deeper understanding of a destination's gastronomic traditions, the more likely they are to revisit and actively seek similar experiences. Moreover, this growing interest extends beyond simply savoring local cuisine—it translates into a broader engagement with culinary tourism, including activities such as visiting gastronomic museums, attending food-related cultural events, and participating at cooking workshops.

The results further reinforce the idea that gastronomic tourism extends beyond simple food consumption, evolving into a multidimensional experience that links cultural engagement, learning, and social interaction. While social engagement remains a primary driver, there is also a need to cater to travelers who seek solitude, deeper cultural immersion, or a more personalized approach to food experiences. To accommodate these varied interests, destinations should offer a well-balanced mix of group-oriented and individual culinary activities. Group activities could include food tours, communal dining experiences, and interactive cooking classes, fostering connections among travelers. Meanwhile, private tastings, chef's table experiences, and customized gastronomic itineraries could appeal to those seeking exclusivity and deeper engagement with local cuisine. This diversity in preferences implies that destinations should adopt a multifaceted approach to culinary tourism.

To cater to these motivations, tourism planners should curate experiences that emphasize active discovery, hands-on engagement, and deeper cultural connectivity. Initiatives such as farm-to-table experiences, where travelers witness the journey of ingredients from harvest to plate, or local ingredient workshops that offer an educational component on regional flavors, provide an enriched, interactive dimension to culinary exploration. Additionally, fusion cuisine tastings—blending traditional and contemporary culinary influences—can appeal to travelers' sense of adventure while offering a nuanced appreciation of evolving gastronomic landscapes.

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