

CONSUMER PERCEPTION ON THE LOCAL GASTRONOMICAL POINTS

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Abstract

The paper aimed to present the consumer perception on the local gastronomic points given their novelty on the market and their huge importance for the rural development. A study was conducted among the population of Cluj County using an online questionnaire. Results indicate that the consumers are preoccupied to consume local food and drinks when they travel to rural destinations. There is a positive attitude towards the LGPs among the respondents which find very attractive all the LGPs characteristics meaning serving traditional meals made from local raw materials within the locals kitchens. For a traditional local menu with a limited assortment the consumers are willing to pay between 31-45 lei. The respondents consider that the LGPs are important within the rural areas and their creation represents an opportunity both for tourism development and for rural resident's incomes.

Key words: local gastronomic point, local food, rural development, rural destinations

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, there has been observed a growing interest for shorting the food supply chains and mainly for local food products and kilometre 0 products [24, 25, 27] given the fact that the consumers are more preoccupied by the sustainable consumption, environment and animal welfare and well-being [2, 14, 30]. The local products do not have an official definition [18] even if there are some generally accepted variants such as the food that is produced, processed and sold within a geographical area of maximum 30 miles" [12] or the geographical area where the distribution chain is short between the producer and consumer [23] while in 2007 it officially appeared the term "Locavores" in the New Oxford American Dictionary describing those individuals that deliberately try or seek to eat only food grown or produced within a 100 miles radius [39]. Local products are considered to be ecologically-friendly

local specialities made from native or local raw materials, processed with a technology specific for a certain region, by a small scale producer [17].

There are many reasons for which the consumers choose to eat local food, but health is the more frequent one mentioned by previous researches [20, 42]. A previous study conducted in Cluj County analyzed the consumer behaviour when choosing a restaurant and results indicated that health represented for most of the respondents the most important decisional factor [10]. Yurtseven and Kaya (2011) [42] identified that besides health, the local food is appreciated also by the quality of taste (including quality, freshness, healthy, clear, good taste), being able to offer to the consumers authentic experience. Their research mentioned also the rural development and learning knowledge as motivational factors [42]. Besides many reasons for local food consumption, Sthapit

and Piramanayagam (2023) [37] mentioned that local food itself became reason for traveling. Discovering new local flavours was the main reason for traveling for the tourists from Spain and the gastronomic experience influenced a lot the consumer satisfaction towards the destination, leading also to customer loyalty [7].

In this context, the local food obtained a crucial role within the promotion of local identity of any region [27] throughout the gastronomy as a factor of tourist attraction [13, 6, 32] being able to provide a large number of advantages for tourist destinations by creating added value and consequently increase the competitiveness of a certain region [16] consolidate and strengthening its image. Previous studies highlighted the strong relationship existing between local gastronomy and tourism [9, 15, 26, 31, 35, 43].

Supporting the rural tourism is one of the objectives of the Romanian National Strategy for Tourism Development (2019-2030) so, an important measure was adopted by creating in 2018 the Local Gastronomic Points (LGPs) that are family-type public catering units which offer to those who wish food products and dishes specific to the geographical areas of Romania under the conditions of compliance to hygiene rules and regulations [3]. What makes these LGPs unique is the fact that the menu is different from that of restaurants by being allowed to have a daily menu with a limited assortment (at most 2 types of soups or soups, 2 main courses and possibly 2 types of dessert), specific to the area in which it operates [3]. The LGPs can be perceived as important factors of sustainable rural development thorough a small-scale tourism [4], an important job creator, the most effective way to preserve the gastronomic traditions and a sustainable link between agriculture and tourism [38].

Given the novelty of the LGPs concept, the purpose of the paper is to identify the consumer's perception on this new type of food unit, in order to determine whether the creation of new LGPs represents a real opportunity for the rural residents.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present paper is part of a research conducted among the residents of Cluj County that travelled at least once to the rural areas of Apuseni Mountains. Data was collected using an online questionnaire between February 2022-May 2022. The questionnaire had three main parts: the first section comprised questions and statements regarding the consumer behavior of food during travels in general and the consumer behavior at the destinations from Apuseni Mountains, the second part referred to the attitudes and perceptions towards LGPs in general with the aim of identify the degree of knowledge referring to this new form of business and the opportunity to create new LGP in the Apuseni Mountains in particular; while the third part comprised the main socio-demographical questions.

Cluj County has a population of 679,141 residents of which 409,924 lives in urban areas and 269,217 residents live in rural areas [29]. The rural areas of Apuseni Mountains are very accessible in terms of distance for the Cluj County inhabitants that want to travel to the mountains.

The questions referring to the Local Gastronomic Points were designed based on the official definitions offered by the ANSVSA (2017) that characterizes them as "family-type public catering units, which offer food products and preparations specific to the geographical areas of Romania to those who wish, subject to compliance with hygiene rules and conditions, so that the food is safe and the health of consumers should not suffer" [3]. A total number of 410 questionnaires were collected and only 398 were valid and therefore, used for the analysis.

The convenience sample comprises mainly female respondents, so it is not gender balanced. So, even if the internet was used to overcome the recruitment barriers, other issues uncontrollable could appear [8] such as the unbalanced sample. Another observation was made by Smith (2008) [34] that there is a relationship between gender and the response

rate in the online surveys, women contributing disproportionate to surveys. From the age point of view most of the respondents are youngsters aged between 18-29 years, followed by the respondents aged between 30-39 (25.9%). The respondents aged over 50 years represent the smallest group (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographical characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	Variables	Number of responses N=136	Percent of responses (%)
Gender	Male	81	20.4
	Female	317	79.6
Age	18-29	229	57.5
	30-39	103	25.9
	40-49	45	11.3
	50-59	14	3.5
	+60	7	1.8
Education level	Primary school	7	1.8
	Highschool	115	28.9
	Post high school	30	7.5
	Professional	8	2.0
	Faculty	140	35.2
Occupation	Post-graduate	98	24.6
	Student	104	26.1
	Employee	240	60.3
	Entrepreneur	29	7.3
	Household	15	3.8
Monthly income	Retiree	3	0.8
	Unemployed	2	0.5
	<1,200 lei	46	11.6
	1,201-2,000 lei	60	15.1
	2,001-3,000 lei	82	20.6
Residence	3,001-4,000 lei	82	20.6
	>4,001 lei	128	32.2
Family members	Urban	240	60.3
	Rural	158	39.7
Family members	1 member	13	3.3
	2 members	47	11.8
	3 members	114	28.6
	4 members	148	37.2
	5 members	46	11.6
	More than 5	30	7.5

Source: own contribution.

With regards to education it can be stated that the sample is quite educated since 28.9% graduated high school and 59.9% graduated faculty and post-graduates. The main categories of respondents are the employees (60%) and students (26.1%). The monthly income is situated between 2,001-3,000 lei for 20.6% of the respondents, while most of them have a monthly more than 4,001 lei (32.2%). The respondents with an income less than 1,200 lei hold the smaller percentage of all the categories that is 11.6%. The residence is urban for most of the respondents (60.3%) while 39.7% live in rural areas. Most of the

respondents have a family of four members (37.2%) followed by the respondents with three members (28.6%). The singles and the families with more than 5 members represent the smallest percentages (Table 1).

Data were analyzed using SPSS 19.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive analysis and means were used in order to create the socio-demographical profile for the respondents and also to determine the respondents' perception on the LGP.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents' preference for consuming local food during travels

Results indicate that the respondents are very attracted to local foods and drinks during their travels, facts that reinforce previous studies which showed the close connection between travels and consuming local [11, 1, 21] as part of the tourist experience [22]. So, with regards to food, 44.7% of the respondents agree that when they travel they prefer the local food instead of the international food from the restaurants and 23.4% totally agree with the statement. Similar results were obtained by Sünnetçioğlu et al. (2020) [38] who observed that the tourists which visit Turkey prefer the local food. Orea-Giner and Fusté-Forné (2023) concluded that local food is preferred by tourists because it is considered tastier than other types of food [28]. It can be noticed the very low percent of 2.5% of the respondents that they totally disagree and 4.8% that disagree with the statement (Figure 1).

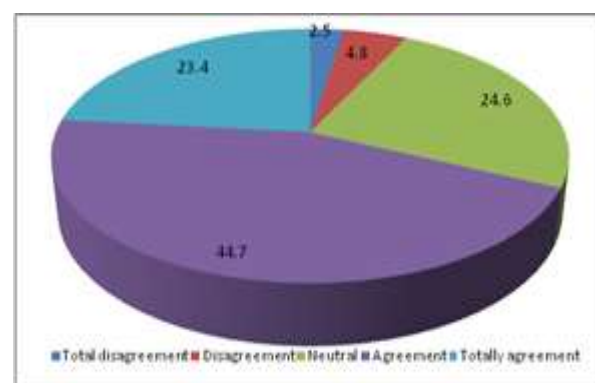


Fig. 1 When they travel, respondents prefer the local foods instead of the commercial ones
 Source: own contribution.

When it comes to the type of drinks consumed during their travels, the respondents have quite the same position, meaning they prefer the local drinks instead the commercial ones, even if the percentage of the respondents that disagree with the statement is higher compared to the case of food, 7.3% totally disagree they prefer local drinks and 10.3% disagree (Figure 2). The same aspect was observed by Kline and Knollenberg (2018) [22], reporting that the tourist were divided into three types of clusters and all made special efforts at the destination to find local drinks. The same behavior, locally oriented when it comes to food and drinks at a tourist destination has been observed among both categories of travelers: youngsters [41] and also among senior travelers [5].

A special attention must be offered to the huge percentage of 35.9% of the respondents that declared themselves indifferent to the possibility to try local food or drinks. It is possible that this category not being so informed about what are the main characteristics of the local food and therefore. So, in order to attract them, special messages must be presented focusing on the local food advantages and characteristics, the health benefits and sustainable aspects.

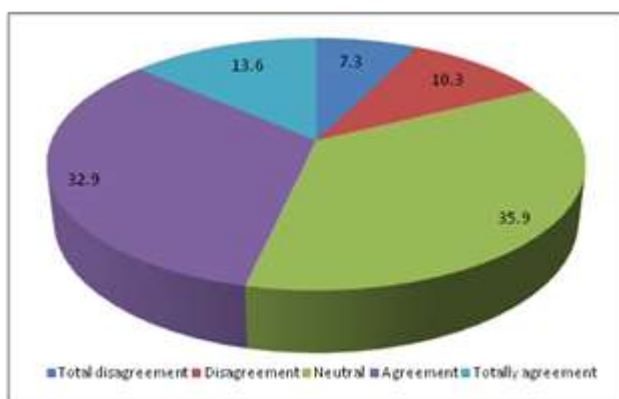


Fig. 2. When they travel, respondents prefer the local drinks instead of the commercial ones
 Source: own contribution.

With regards to the sources of information that the respondents use when they intend to take lunch/dinner in a rural destination, the Internet is the most important one, 64.8% of the respondents declared that it represents the most credible source next to friends and family which represents an important source

for 60.3%, while the locals are important only for 23.9% of the total sample. It can be observed that the indicatives at the destination and the points of touristic information are the least important sources of information (Figure 3).

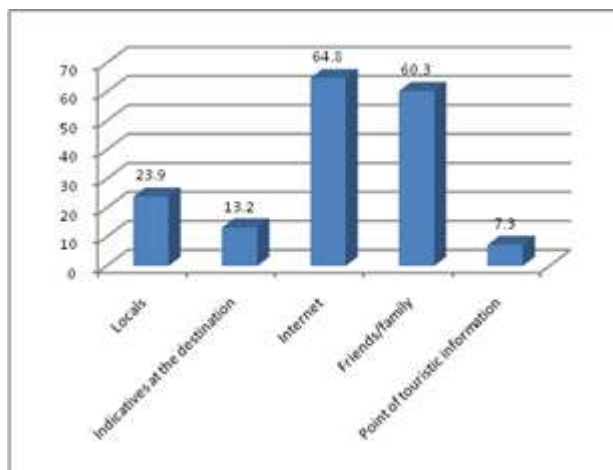


Fig. 3. Respondents' sources of information regarding the possibility to eat at the rural destination
 Source: own contribution.

Respondents' perception on the LGP's main characteristics

In order to determine whether the characteristics of the LGPs could attract tourists, the respondents were asked how attractive they consider each of the LGPs characteristic. The highest mean was obtained by the perspective of consuming dishes prepared according to traditional recipes (Mean=4.39; Std. dev=0.77) so it can be concluded that the respondents are very attracted to the traditional dishes when they choose to travel and the possibility to find a precise place when they can be sure that the food is specific for the area and also traditional, is quite attractive (Table 2). Also, attractive is considered by the respondents that the raw materials from which the dishes are prepared must come from the owners' household or from authorized/registered sanitary, veterinary and food safety units (Mean=4.35; Std. dev=0.88).

The third attractive characteristic of a LGP is the fact that the daily menu has a limited assortment (at most 2 soups, 2 main courses and possibly 2 desserts) (Mean=4.01; Std.dev=0.94). A possible explanation for the fact that this statement is considered

attractive, but not as attractive as the first two statements might reside in the fact that some respondents could consider that a limited assortment could lead to situations when none of the dishes be eligible to be chosen.

The perspective to serve food in the private kitchens of rural families ((Mean=3.93; Std. dev=1.06)) and that the food to be prepared only by the PGL’s owner or by its’ family members (Mean=3.93; Std. dev=1.01) is almost attractive for the respondents, but not so attractive as the rest statements, being more indifferent to these aspects (Table 2).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of characteristics referring to LGP

Characteristics of LGPs	Mean	Std. deviation
Items 1-Not attractive at all; 5-Very attractive		
Serving food in the private kitchens of rural families	3.93	1.06
Daily menu with a limited assortment (at most 2 soups, 2 main courses and possibly 2 desserts)	4.01	0.94
The dishes will be prepared according to traditional recipes	4.39	0.77
Food prepared only by the owner, or by family members.	3.93	1.01
The raw materials from which the dishes are prepared must come from the own household or from authorized/registered sanitary, veterinary and food safety units.	4.35	0.88

Source: own contribution.

Regarding the exact percentage of the respondents that find very attractive each of the LGP, it can be observed that the fact that the raw materials for the dishes must come from the owners’ household or from authorized/registered sanitary, veterinary and food safety units is very attractive for most of the respondents (55.3%) followed by 53% of the respondents that consider the traditional recipes within the LGP very attractive.

The third most attractive aspect is the fact that the food must be prepared by the owner, a percentage of 34.4% of the respondents declared that this aspect is very attractive (Figure 4). All these findings are in line with the new trends regarding food and the consumer’s preference for local dishes and

traditional food especially when they travel [33].

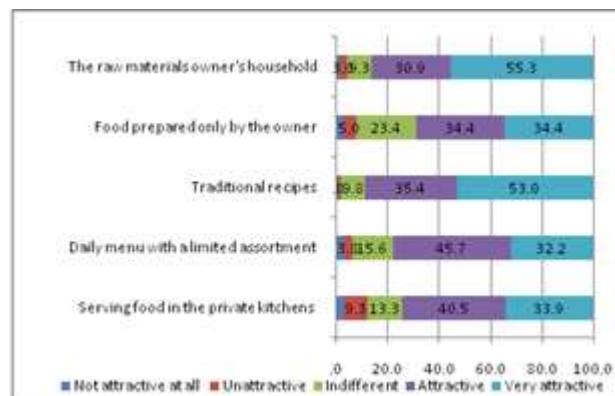


Fig. 4. Percentage in which the respondents consider attractive the LGPs' characteristics

Source: own contribution.

A correlation between the number of family members and the most sensitive characteristics of the LGP regarding serving the meals in the local’s kitchen revealed that it is very attractive for 46% of the singles and also for large families with more than 5 members (47%) (Figure 5).

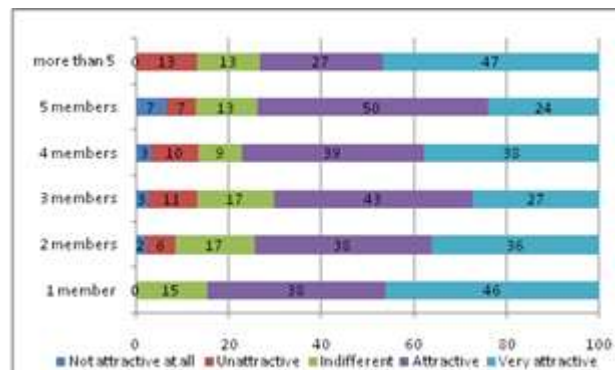


Fig. 5. Correlation between number of family members and the possibility to eat in the local’s kitchens

Source: own contribution.

Respondents’ preference for LGPs and the opportunity to create LGPs in the touristic rural areas

Most of the respondents totally agree (32.2%) that they would prefer to serve the food in a PGL instead of a restaurant when they travel to rural areas, while 45.2% agree with the statement.

The percentage of the indifferent respondents is quite low (18.1%) while the respondents that disagree summarize 4.5% (Figure 6).

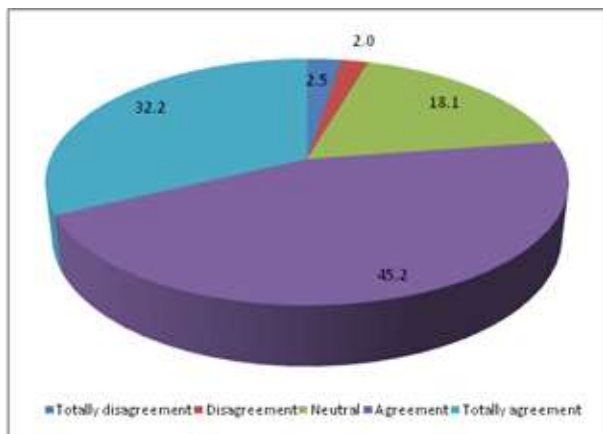


Fig. 6. Respondents would prefer to serve food in a PGL instead of a restaurant
 Source: own contribution.

An important fact and very promising for the rural residents is the fact that the respondents consider that at least one LGP should exist in every touristic rural area. Only a small percentage of 1.8% of the respondents disagrees with the statement and 1.3% totally disagree (Figure 7).

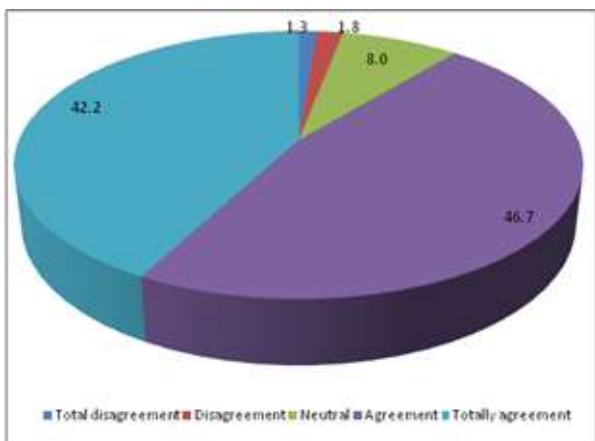


Fig. 7. LGPs should exist in every touristic rural area
 Source: own contribution.

The amount of money that the respondents are willing to spend for a meal in a PGL is between 31-45 lei for the highest percentage of the respondents (37.2%) followed by 35.4% of the respondents that are willing to offer more, meaning 46-60 lei. Only 8.3% appreciate that such a menu worth 15-30 lei, while 19.1% would offer 61-80 lei (Figure 8). Next, a correlation between the amount of money willing to spend for a menu in LGP and the respondents' income revealed as expected that as higher is the income the much money people are willing to spend.

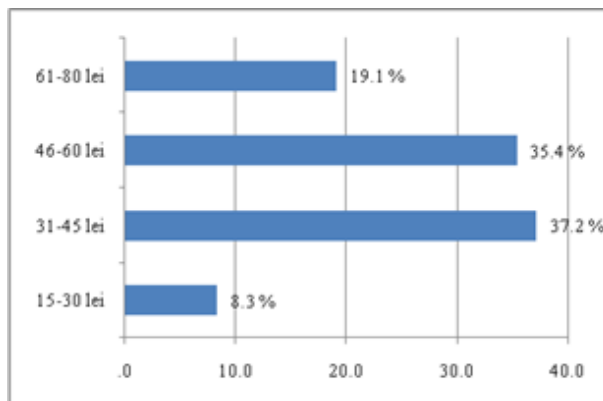


Fig. 8. Amount of money that respondents are willing to spend for a meal in a LGP
 Source: own contribution.

A percentage of 33% of respondents with an income less than 1,200 lei are willing to pay maximum 30 lei for a menu and 35% maximum 45 lei, while the smallest percent of 7% are willing to pay 61-80 lei. Most of the respondents that are willing to pay more than 61 lei for a menu have an income over 4,000 lei. Only 2% of this category would pay less than 30 lei for such a menu (Figure 9).

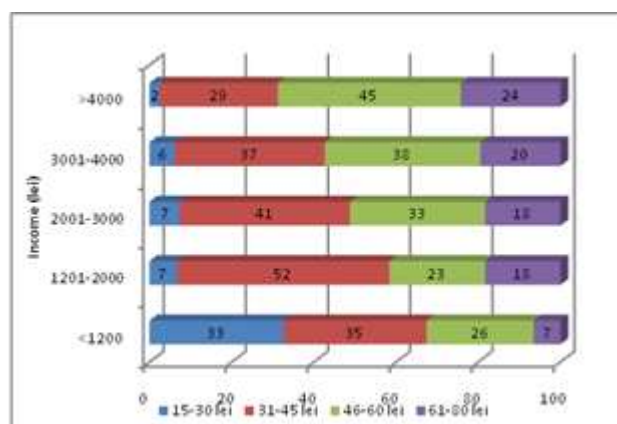


Fig. 9. Correlation between the amount of money willing to spend for a menu in LGP and income
 Source: own contribution.

Consumer perception on the Local Gastronomic Points

Results indicate that the respondents generally have a positive attitude towards the LGP, an encouraging aspect for the rural residents that desire to become entrepreneurs within a small-scale business. The consumer preference for local food and drinks when they visit a tourist destination was observed by previous researches [28, 36] and confirmed by the present study. So, it is obvious how

food and drinks can contribute to promote a tourist destination, by creating the “sense of place” [19] and determine the visitors to associate different types of dishes to the destination itself. It is an efficient way to create a gastronomical local culture with positive consequences for the local residents, by increasing their incomes and contribute to activities diversification.

The main characteristics of a LGP, a food unit very new on the Romanian market could have represented barriers for some tourists (e.g. serving food in the owners’ kitchen, limited assortment), but the findings suggest quite the opposite. In fact the respondents find all these aspects very attractive and the explanation could be related to the fact that if they choose to visit rural areas, their profile is different to the standard tourists, by their desire to connect to the rural traditions including food and drinks. So the LGP represents a condensed symbol of the rural local cuisine from a certain area which the tourists are eager to try as part of their experience. Results indicate that most of the respondents are willing to pay between 31-45 lei for a complete menu offered by a LGP, an amount of money comparable to a common menu from a city restaurant. Besides the respondents’ desire to consume local dishes when they travel to rural areas, the LGP respond to the necessity to increase the touristic infrastructure in the rural areas, where the possibilities for the tourists to serve lunch or dinner are very limited or even inexistent. So the respondents’ opinion related to the LGP is that they should be encountered in every touristic rural area. First, the implementation of Local Gastronomic Points could have positive effects for many stakeholders: the tourists will have a safe place to serve local dishes, while the inhabitants of rural areas besides the supplementary incomes obtained will also have the opportunity to show to others their interest and skills in traditional cuisine, revealing to tourists the local specialties and therefore, increasing their self-esteem by becoming famous for their food and being associated to their geographical area.

Secondly, the development of Local Gastronomic Points helps the horizontal development of the region where this activity will be carried out, by creating new jobs, by supporting small producers who will help supply the raw materials necessary for the preparation of traditional products and last but not least, it helps to develop national tourism and attract national and international tourists [40].

CONCLUSIONS

The most recent trends referring to consumer behavior indicate that the individuals are more and more attracted to consume local food and drinks especially when they choose to travel. So, the creation of the Local Gastronomic Points is perceived in a positive way because they offer the consumers the possibility to try local food made by the residents of the rural areas they are visiting making enriching their tourist experience. The Local Gastronomic Points truly represents an opportunity both for the rural areas in Romania, by giving the residents the possibility to obtain supplementary incomes, but also for the tourists which otherwise couldn’t have the chance to try and taste local specialties. Besides that, the creation of the LGPs could have important consequences for the sustainable rural development contributing to an attractive image for any destination, the “sense of place” that can promote it both at a national and international level. Given the respondents' positive attitudes towards the LGPs, the rural inhabitants that have the conditions and the desire to create a LGP must take advantage of this opportunity in order to create a small business and most important, to find ways to be present it on the Internet since it became the most important source of information for the consumers.

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