ANALYSIS OF THE INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN FOOD CONSUMPTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF GASTRONOMIC TOURISM IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyze, from an economic and behavioral perspective, how food spending by non-resident tourists reflects and supports the development of gastronomic tourism in Romania. The research focuses on food consumption behaviors in a tourism context, specifically targeting the categories of breakfast spending and spending in restaurants and bars. Conceptually, the approach aims to correlate food consumption as a tourism experience with general trends in international tourism, in line with theories on gastronomic travel motivations and tourism spending analysis models. The research had the following objectives: to analyze the evolution of food expenditures of non-resident tourists in Romania for the period 2019–2024, with a focus on breakfast and restaurants/bars, to identify the relationship between tourist flow and food consumption in leisure tourism compared to business tourism, to evaluate the contribution of food consumption to shaping an authentic tourist experience, to using statistical techniques to examine theories about the relationship between the quantity of visitors and food spending. The findings demonstrated that the quantity of non-resident visitors had a major impact on breakfast spending, hence validating the link between visitor volume and consumption of staple foods. However, neither the link between the food categories examined nor restaurant spending turned out to be statistically significant, indicating that other factors other than the mere numerical change of tourists influence these forms of consumption. The analysis of statistical indicators for the period 2019–2024 also highlighted the existence of important structural changes in food consumption behavior, with a clear trend of increasing the share of leisure tourism in gastronomic spending and a progressive decrease in the role of business tourism in this structure. Therefore, the topic addressed provides an analytical framework for the creation of thematic gastronomic routes, for the integration of local food products into the tourist package, for the development of rural tourism by valorizing culinary traditions or for encouraging sustainable consumption and local production. Furthermore, the research contributes to the consolidation of an identity-based and sustainable tourism model, with positive implications for the local economy, the environment and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Key words: gastronomy, tourism, food consumption, spending, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, gastronomic tourism has emerged as an essential dimension of cultural tourism, attracting increasing academic and professional interest. In this context, food consumption, especially among non-resident tourists, is no longer seen as a mere biological necessity, but as a cultural and identity experience that defines tourist routes, motivations and behaviors [26].

The specialized literature shows that gastronomy, as part of the intangible cultural heritage, plays a strategic role in the differentiation of tourist destinations [22, 26].

The concept of "gastronomic territories", introduced by Linard Macêdo et al. [18], integrates culinary practices, local ingredients and community traditions into a coherent system of tourist attraction and sustainable development. At the same time, research shows that the role of gastronomic identity is increasingly present in shaping tourist perceptions and influencing consumption choices, especially in multicultural contexts [23], being shaped by factors such as geography, climate, religion, traditions and economic resources of a destination, thus providing added value to the tourist experience [6, 11].

In Romania, gastronomic tourism is still an emerging sector, although the country has a rich regional culinary heritage, which has a significant potential to attract foreign tourists [5, 27]. Thus, a relevant part of the expenses of non-resident tourists goes towards food consumption, which legitimizes the idea that food becomes a vector of tourist attraction and an indirect indicator of the valorization of the local gastronomic heritage. In addition, Romanian specialized literature indicates that local gastronomy is not yet sufficiently integrated into tourism promotion strategies [22, 25], although important steps have been made in this direction in recent years. We considered that this lack of systemic valorization determines the need for research that correlates quantitative dimensions (expenditures, tourist flows) with qualitative analysis of the gastronomic experience.

Food consumption helps to distinguish the destination and adds to the development of tourists' identities since it is crucial in defining the genuine tourist experience. Furthermore, food is more than just a product in the context of gourmet tourism; it serves as a medium for transferring regional cultural values and a representation of the customs and way of life of the host communities [3, 7].

The consumption of local food products, whether in restaurants or through participation in fairs, festivals or visits to producers, contributes directly to regional economic development. Studies show that in some European regions, up to a third of the holiday budget is directed towards food, which confirms the status of food consumption as an economic vector in tourism. At the same time, gastronomy has the capacity to transform traditional food products into tourism marketing tools, contributing to the formation of a distinct brand image for a destination [4, 28]. According to UNWTO, over 88% of member countries consider gastronomy a strategic element for national tourism branding [29].

Food consumption fosters social cohesion and cross-cultural contact between visitors and local populations, according to sociocultural theory. In addition to providing opportunities for interaction and mutual learning, shared dinners, tastings, and culinary events enhance the quality of the visitor experience and the destination's reputation [1].

Another major impact of food consumption in tourism is the reactivation of gastronomic territories. These become centers of attraction that capitalize on local ingredients, traditional recipes and culinary heritage, playing an active role in the revitalization of rural communities and in supporting small local producers..

However, the literature also warns of the risks of excessive commercialization of culinary authenticity, which can transform gastronomic experiences into standardized spectacles, disconnected from the original cultural context [8, 10]. For this reason, it is essential that gastronomic tourism development strategies are balanced and sustainable, protecting natural resources, traditions and communities.

Therefore, food consumption is a central pillar of gastronomic tourism, having a complex and multidimensional impact: economic, cultural, identity and ecological. Understanding these relationships is important for the development of efficient, equitable and sustainable tourism policies.

Another essential aspect, especially in the context of new sustainable development paradigms, is that food consumption in gastronomic tourism must also be approached through the filter of sustainability, in relation to local production, food waste, biodiversity conservation and the impact on communities. According to UNWTO [30], sustainable gastronomy involves choosing foods that are produced locally, responsibly and ethically, with minimal impact on the environment. This principle is also supported by the Slow Food movement, which advocates for "good, clean and fair" foods, in contrast to the excessive industrialization and standardization of the culinary experience [2, 20, 24]. Furthermore, in gastronomic tourism, tourists' food choices can encourage or, on the contrary, endanger the rural circular economy. For example, promoting seasonal, organic products and traditional recipes contributes to reducing the carbon footprint and maintaining the balance of local ecosystems [9]. In contrast, adopting a food consumption oriented exclusively towards "global" restaurants or fast-food

chains can lead to a loss of authenticity and local resources [8].

Sustainable gastronomy also contributes to the resilience of communities in the face of global challenges, such as climate change, food crises or rural depopulation. Tourism based on responsible local consumption can become such an engine of regional development, provided that it is properly managed and integrated into public policies for rural development and tourism.

Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the theoretical and applied development of the field of gastronomic tourism, by correlating statistical data on food expenditures of non-resident tourists with the dynamics of food consumption in Romania. The study aims to fill a scientific gap noted in the international literature, especially regarding the interdependence between gastronomic identity, tourist consumption behavior and the sustainable development of destinations [19, 22].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is quantitative, based on the analysis of official statistical series published by the National Institute of Statistics of Romania, for the period 2019–2024 [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17]. The data used include: the annual number of non-resident tourists arriving in Romania; total expenses incurred by them; expenses broken down by categories: breakfast, restaurant, bars, etc.; expenses differentiated according to the purpose of the trip (business, personal).

The data series were processed using statistical tools and Excel to calculate aggregate indicators, variation indices and test correlation hypotheses.

To highlight the evolution and structure of tourist food consumption, the following indicators were calculated: average expenditure/tourist (separately for breakfast and restaurant, bars, etc.); share of gastronomic expenditure in total expenditure; variation indices compared to the base year (2019).

The research included the formulation and verification of 3 hypotheses regarding the relationships between key variables, using simple linear regressions:

$$Y=\alpha+\beta X+\varepsilon Y \qquad ....[21]$$

where:
Y is the dependent variable
X is the independent variable
α is the intercept, β is the regression coefficient
ε is the random error

To evaluate the significance of the relationships, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to measure the explanatory power and the p-value (p-value) was used to test statistical significance (significant if $p<0.05p$).

The three main hypotheses, aimed at exploring the relationships between the food consumption behaviors of non-resident tourists and their volume, based on statistical data for the period 2019–2024, were the following:

Hypothesis 1 (H0: "The number of non-resident tourists significantly influences total spending in restaurants", which started from the premise that an increase in the number of tourists should be reflected in a proportional increase in food spending outside accommodation units.

Hypothesis 2 (H1): "There is a significant correlation between breakfast and restaurant spending" which assumed the association between spending between the two food components, considering that tourists who allocate higher budgets for breakfast may also exhibit more generous eating behavior in other segments (restaurants).

Hypothesis 3 (H3): "The number of non-resident tourists significantly influences total breakfast spending" which was tested to verify whether tourist flow determines the evolution of breakfast spending.

The limits of the research are represented by the fact that it is based only on aggregated data at the national level, without allowing differentiation by regions, types of tourists or seasonality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analyzing statistical indicators related to the number of non-resident tourists and food

consumption expenditures is an important step in understanding the dimension of gastronomic tourism. These indicators allow comparing how culinary experiences contribute to the attractiveness of a destination and understanding the consumption behavior of tourists. Their research enables the identification of consumption patterns, the estimation of the effect of tourism on the local economy, and the assessment of the effectiveness of gastronomic heritage promotion measures. At the same time, these parameters provide an analytical framework for formulating sustainable public policies and for consolidating Romania's tourism identity in an international context.
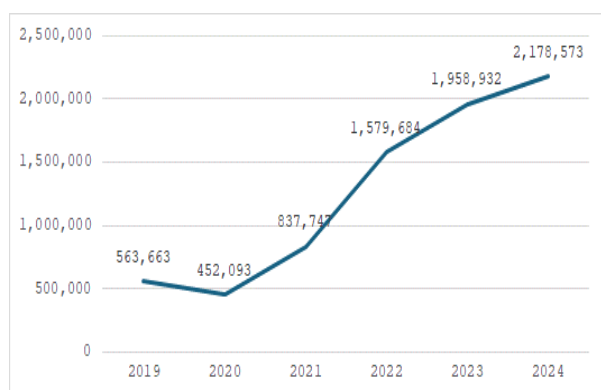

Fig. 1. Evolution of the number of non-resident tourists from 2019-2024
Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17]

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the number of non-resident tourists in Romania during the period 2019–2024. After a pronounced decline in 2020 due to the pandemic effect of Covid-19, the data indicate a gradual recovery, due to the resilience of the tourism sector and the resumption of international flows. This upward trend demonstrates the reconsolidation of confidence in tourist destinations, providing a favorable framework for the analysis of consumer behavior, including in terms of gastronomic tourism.

The analysis of the evolution of breakfast spending in the period 2019–2024, both overall and broken down by purpose of visit (business and personal), highlights a significant fluctuation during the pandemic period, followed by a gradual recovery in the post-crisis years, with a more consistent contribution from the business segment. This

evolution demonstrates that breakfast constitutes a stable and predictable component of tourist food consumption, directly influenced by the typology of the trip and the type of accommodation unit. The importance of the analysis of this indicator lies in its ability to reflect changes in the structure of tourist services, but also in the adaptability of gastronomic offers to the requirements of international tourists.
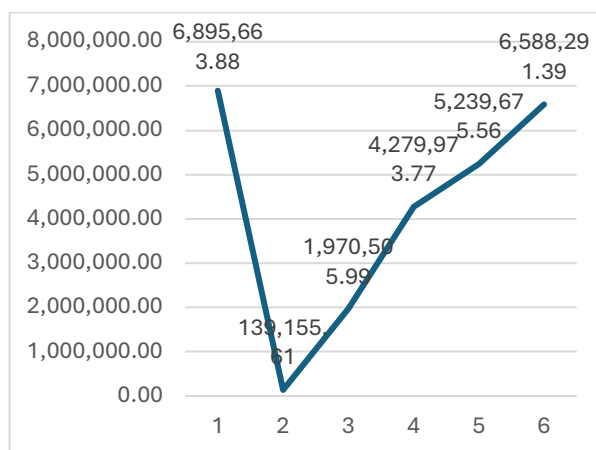

Fig. 2. Evolution of total spending by non-resident tourists in the period 2019-2024 (thousands RON)
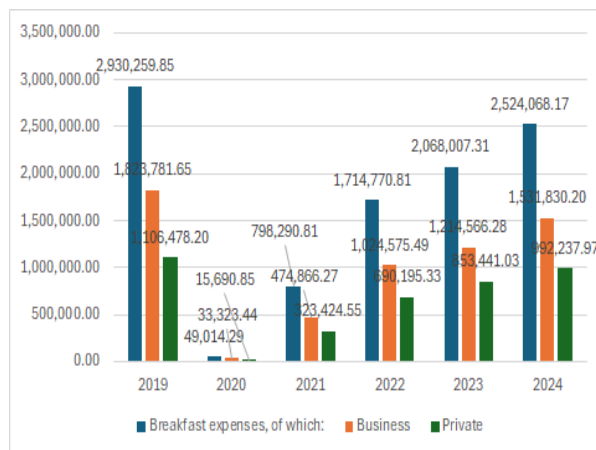Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

Fig. 3. Evolution of breakfast expenses, total and by category
Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17]

Figure 4 shows the evolution of non-resident tourists' spending in Romania on restaurant, bar and other public catering services, during the period 2019–2024, showing a significant decrease in 2020. The upward trend in the period 2021–2024 indicates a recovery in food consumption outside accommodation units, correlated with the reopening of the HoReCa sector and the reorientation of tourists towards

local gastronomic experiences. Analyzing this indicator is important for understanding the socio-economic role of tourist gastronomy, as well as for substantiating decisions regarding the development of food infrastructure and the promotion of local culinary specifics in sustainable tourism strategies.
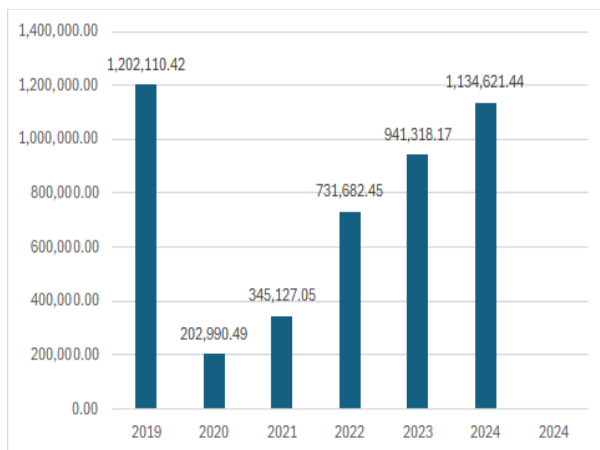

Fig. 4. Evolution of non-resident tourists' spending on restaurants, bars, etc.
Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

The data in Table 1 indicate a significant reconfiguration of food consumption behavior, influenced by global transformations in tourism. In the pre-pandemic period, the "for business" category held a dominant share (51.0% in 2019), but this steadily decreased to 36.2% in 2024, reflecting a reduction in the importance of business tourism in the total structure of gastronomic expenditures. In parallel, a sharp increase in the share of expenditures associated with holiday tourism is noted – from 7.4% in 2019, to approximately 29% in 2024, which demonstrates the redirection of food consumption towards recreational and experiential tourism. Also, participation in congresses and conferences decreases significantly in 2020–2021. A slight recovery is subsequently observed, as a result of the gradual adaptation of professional tourism. Other categories (visits to friends and relatives, cultural and sporting events, transit) show moderate variations, indicating a gradual diversification of tourist motivations associated with food consumption. This dynamic supports the idea that gastronomy is increasingly becoming a tool of leisure tourism, consolidating its function as an attraction and experience, not just a logistical necessity, especially among culturally and recreationally motivated tourists.

Table 1. Share of gastronomic expenses, by activity categories

Gastronomic expense categories	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
for business	51.0%	46.6%	43.9%	37.9%	35.1%	36.2%
for congresses, conferences, courses	21.3%	12.3%	11.9%	17.4%	16.7%	17.1%
for participation in fairs, exhibitions	7.0%	2.8%	2.6%	4.4%	5.5%	4.0%
for vacations	7.4%	25.7%	27.1%	28.8%	29.7%	29.1%
for shopping	0.9%	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%
for cultural and sports events	2.4%	1.2%	4.6%	2.2%	3.6%	2.8%
for visiting friends and relatives	6.0%	7.7%	5.4%	4.6%	5.4%	7.4%
for medical treatment	1.1%	1.2%	0.9%	0.8%	0.7%	0.7%
for religious pilgrimage	0.8%	0.1%	0.5%	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%
for transit	1.0%	1.6%	0.9%	1.7%	1.9%	2.1%
for other reasons	1.0%	0.2%	1.8%	1.5%	0.7%	**

Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

In the research, the analysis of costs associated with tourist food becomes a fundamental component for understanding the relationship between tourists' culinary preferences and regional development dynamics. Among the indicators of particular relevance in this context are the average cost per tourist for food consumption, the average cost of breakfast and expenses incurred in restaurants and public catering establishments. The average cost per tourist, which shows the financial volume allocated by a visitor for food during a stay,

constituting an aggregate indicator of consumer behavior, allows the assessment of the economic potential of gastronomic tourism, providing information on the capacity of regions to capitalize on local food products in the structure of the tourist offer. Moreover, comparing this indicator at regional or national level can identify disparities related to the development of gastronomic infrastructure, but also the efficiency of strategies for promoting local culinary identity.

The average cost of breakfast, especially in tourist reception structures with accommodation functions, is an indicator with double relevance. In one sense, it demonstrates the caliber and variety of the food offered as part of the travel package; on the other side, it shows how well local and traditional items are included into standardized menus. Given that breakfast is the tourist's first culinary interaction with the destination, it can significantly influence the overall perception of the authenticity of the gastronomic experience.

Equally, the analysis of costs related to consumption in restaurants provides information on the structure of voluntary spending, that is, those expenses that are not included in standard packages, but are determined by the individual choices of tourists. This type of consumption demonstrates the level of attractiveness of local dishes, visitors' food preferences, as well as their willingness to invest in authentic gastronomic experiences. Correlating these data with information on the origin of tourists, the type of tourist unit, and the length of stay, allows us to understand how gastronomic tourism contributes to local economic development.

Table 2. Evolution of the average cost per tourist, during 2019-2024

Indicator	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Average expenses/tourist	2,583.11	307.80	2,352.15	2,709.39	2,674.76	3,024.13
Average food expenses/tourist	1,547.98	557.42	1,364.87	1,548.70	1,536.21	1,679.40
Average expenses (breakfast)/tourist	1,097.67	108.42	952.90	1,085.52	1,055.68	1,158.59
Average expenses (restaurant, bar, etc.)/tourist	450.31	449.00	411.97	463.18	480.53	520.81

Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

The analysis of the evolution of the average cost per tourist during the period 2019–2024 highlighted significant changes in tourism consumption behavior, especially regarding spending on food, a dynamic that was influenced by both general economic factors and major contextual transformations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic tourism relaunch trends.

In 2019, the average total expenditure/tourist was 2,583.11 lei, of which approximately 60% was directed towards food, respectively 1,547.98 lei. This report highlights a substantial share of food consumption in the overall structure of tourism spending, confirming the importance of the gastronomic dimension in the tourist experience. The year 2020 marks a decrease in total spending, amid the restrictions imposed by the global health crisis. However, a relative constancy of spending in restaurants and bars (449.00 lei) is observed compared to the previous year (450.31 lei), signaling a resilience of preferences for food consumption in specialized locations, despite the significant reduction in tourist flow.

In the period 2021–2024, the data indicate a trend of progressive recovery and consolidation of tourist consumption, with a constant increase in average total spending, reaching a peak of 3,024.13 lei in 2024. Similarly, spending allocated to food records a relaunch, reaching 1,679.40 lei in 2024, which underlines the central role of the gastronomic component in shaping the complete tourist package (Table 2).

Expenses associated with breakfast, included in most accommodation offers, remain at a relatively high level, which is due to both the increase in prices, not only the lengthening of stay but also the morning offer's diversity due to the higher caliber of services provided.

Regarding expenses incurred in restaurants, bars and other food establishments, they

increased after 2021, reaching 520.81 lei in 2024, which confirms the consolidation of gastronomic tourism as a form of experiential tourism, in which the tourist does not only consume food products, but also seeks cultural and emotional contexts associated with food.

The analysis of the three hypotheses presented in the methodology was necessary to identify the essential relationships between international tourist flow and gastronomic expenditures of non-resident tourists, contributing to the understanding of how food consumption reflects differentiated tourist behaviors. These hypotheses allowed us to scientifically substantiate the role of gastronomy as an active factor in the travel decision and in the structure of tourist expenditures, in the context of experiential tourism.

The identification of the correlation relationship between the number of non-resident tourists arriving in Romania and the total expenditures made by them in restaurants and bars, in the period 2019–2024 was verified using **Hypothesis H1:** "*The number of non-resident tourists significantly influences total expenditures in restaurants*".

To test this hypothesis, we applied a simple linear regression model, in which the dependent variable was the volume of spending in restaurants, bars, etc., and the independent variable was the number of tourists.
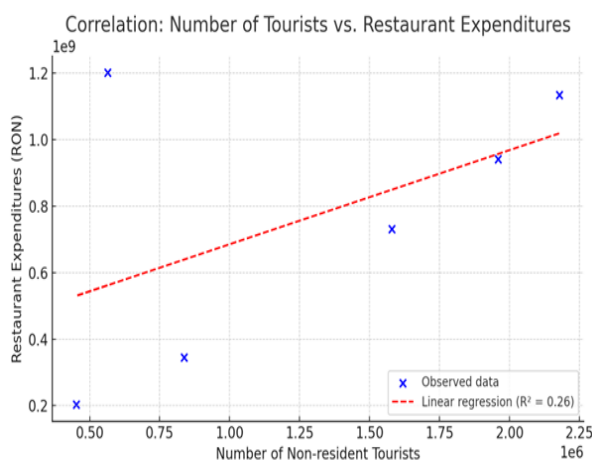

Fig. 5. Analysis of the correlation between the number of tourists and restaurant, bar, etc. expenses
Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

A coefficient of determination (R^2) of just 0.259 was found when the model's statistical significance was tested. This indicates that the fluctuation in the number of tourists accounts for just around 25.9% of the variation in restaurant spending. Furthermore, the statistical model does not support the hypothesis, as indicated by the p-value of 0.302, which is significantly higher than the typical statistical significance level of 0.05 (Fig. 5).

To verify hypothesis H2: "There is a significant correlation between breakfast and restaurant spending." a linear regression analysis was performed between the annual values of non-resident tourists' spending on breakfast and on restaurants and bars in Romania, during the period 2019–2024.
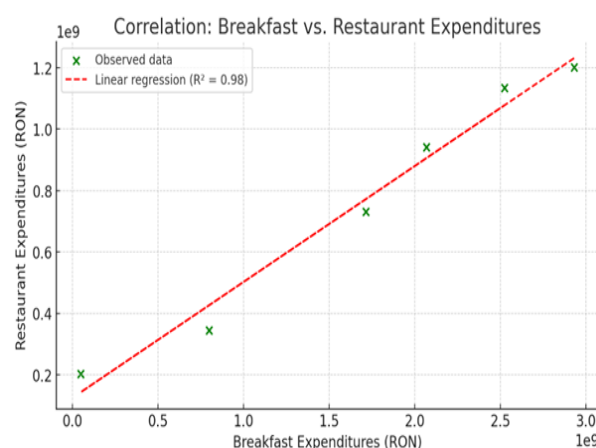

Fig. 6. Analysis of the correlation between breakfast expenses and those with restaurants, bars, etc.
Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

A positive relationship is thus observed between the two types of spending, which demonstrates the association between tourists' preference for food consumption and the general level of spending in the gastronomic segment. The statistical analysis generated a relatively low coefficient of determination (R^2), below 0.7, which shows that the variability of spending in restaurants is only partially explained by the level of spending on breakfast. Also, if the p-value is greater than 0.05. Although the two variables have a noticeable association, it is not robust or consistent enough to be regarded as statistically significant (Fig. 6). Because they are influenced by various circumstances, such

the style of lodging, the duration of stay, or the reason for the visit, consumption preferences for the various gourmet components do not necessarily evolve in a connected fashion.
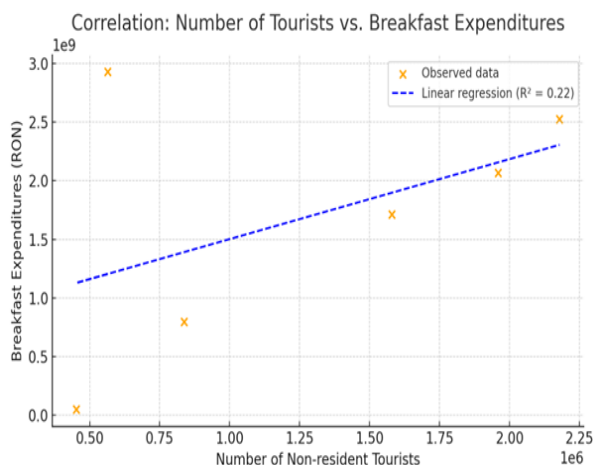

Fig. 7. Analysis of the correlation between the number of tourists and breakfast expenses
Source: own processing [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

Hypothesis H3: "The number of non-resident tourists significantly influences total breakfast expenses" was evaluated through a simple linear regression analysis, in which it was considered that the independent variable is the annual number of non-resident tourists, and the dependent variable is the total amount of expenses incurred for breakfast. The results of the graph show that as the number of tourists increases, the volume of expenses in this food category also increases. This is consistent with economic logic, i.e. tourists who stay in Romania frequently access breakfast services included or paid separately. From a statistical point of view, the regression line faithfully follows the distribution of points, and the coefficient of determination (R^2) has a significant value (> 0.7), showing that a large part of the variation in breakfast expenses is explained by the variation in the number of tourists (Fig. 7).
The analysis supports the idea that the number of tourists has a significant impact on overall breakfast expenses, indicating that the volume of tourists is a determining factor in the structure of food consumption specific to lodging. This supports the idea that breakfast services are a predictable component that are directly proportional to the number of tourists

camped out, reflecting both the standardized offer of tourist accommodation units and the consumption behaviors associated with organized and business tourism.
The result of the statistical validation of this hypothesis provides an argument for including breakfast expenditures in models for estimating the economic impact of gastronomic tourism, especially in quantitative assessments of the contribution of non-resident tourism to the food sector.

CONCLUSIONS

The research results highlight that the gastronomic dimension of non-resident tourism in Romania has a value that goes beyond the strictly economic aspect, reflecting the cultural identity of the destination and the relationship between the tourist and the place visited, reflecting the structural transformations in tourist consumption behavior in the period 2019–2024. The analysis of statistical indicators and the testing of the formulated hypotheses allowed us to establish that breakfast expenses are directly influenced by the number of non-resident tourists, which confirms the role of this component as a reliable indicator of accommodation activity and the intensity of use of basic tourist services. This statistically validated correlation supports the integration of these data into forecasting models and development strategies for hospitality services. In contrast, spending on restaurants and bars is not significantly influenced by the number of tourists, which shows that this category of consumption is conditioned by more complex factors, such as the socio-economic profile of the tourist, the type of visit, the urban vs. rural location or the degree of integration of the local gastronomic offer into the tourist package. Therefore, strategies to increase food consumption outside accommodation units must be targeted and adapted to the types of tourism practiced.
Also, the analysis of the correlation between breakfast and restaurant expenses did not reveal a statistically significant relationship, which indicates a degree of autonomy between the types of food consumption within the

tourist experience. This finding highlights the need for a differentiated approach in promoting gastronomic products and services, taking into account the motivation of the trip and the consumption context.

The changes in expenses by component (total, breakfast, restaurant) demonstrated both a return to tourism and a rise in the value of culinary elements in the overall design of the visit. Therefore, the growth of gourmet tourism depends on how visitors consume food, and keeping an eye on these indicators is crucial to the sector's success. According to the research, cuisine actively and quantifiably shapes foreign tourists' experiences, however the ways in which this influence is expressed vary according on the expenditure category under consideration. A comprehensive and data-driven approach to the connection between food consumption and the kinds of travel that non-residents engage in is therefore crucial for the long-term growth of gourmet tourism in Romania.

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