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### **Gastronomic tourism in Albania: an exploratory study of visitor perceptions, experiences, and destination image**

The development of destination branding in former communist countries in eastern and south-eastern Europe has been a growing area of interest in recent years. Research on Balkan tourism has examined cultural heritage, health tourism and economic development. However research on the modern tourism industry in Albania in particular remains emergent. Even less attention has been paid to specialised forms of tourism to Albania. The purpose of the present study is to examine the role of gastronomic tourism in constructing perceptions of Albania as a tourism destination. Drawing from Lai et al (2019), we establish a research framework that considers cognitive and affective factors; perceived and projected brand image; and, intention and positioning effects. We apply this framework to analyse the relationship between gastronomic tourism, tourism development (including rural development), cultural identity, food narratives, and destination image. Data (n = 80) were collected via a convenience, non-probability sample drawn from discussion boards and social media of people who had previously travelled to, or had an interest in, Albania. Factors probed included visitor initial perceptions of Albania, previous gastronomy experiences, trip satisfaction, spending, and travel behaviours. Quantitative responses were analysed using SPSS statistical software. Qualitative comments from respondents were thematically coded for further analysis. The results found that previous visitors expressed satisfaction with gastronomy experiences. Affordability, diversity, quality, traditions and freshness were favoured. Landscape and culture combine to form a 'mental map' in constructing perceptions of the destination. Albania remains an under-explored budget travel destination. Our findings reflect how destination gastronomical identity is rebranded as a result of the economic and political reforms. The findings of this study will benefit policy-makers, tourism marketers, and destination management organisations to improve marketing strategies. Our line of inquiry can be expanded into other forms of special-interest tourism to Albania (e.g. cultural festivals; business events) or more specific demographic segments (e.g. younger vs older travellers). As exploratory research, the paper is limited by its sample size.