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THE ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONAL AND REGIONAL FOOD IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAIN REGION

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Abstract: *For a given region, competitiveness and sustainability play a vital role, as they are critical determinants of residents' quality of life and economic situation. The intensive implementation of rural development also offers opportunities for economic growth. Traditional and regional food products obviously give opportunities for the development of rural areas. Also, their production is significant for the local and Hungarian economies and society. Increasing the production of these food products and expanding and increasing their market outlets can contribute to maintaining the population in certain areas of the region and, among other things, protecting and preserving the tangible and intangible heritage of rural areas. Urban areas are also of particular importance for traditional and regional food: local events, such as themed festivals, and catering operators can also help to promote food products through a conscious, well-thought-out sales and marketing strategy. My research aims to characterize the economic position of traditional and regional food and products among local consumers in the Northern Great Plains region. During the survey, 1.349 people completed the questionnaire, and all of them gave valid responses. I focused on local specificities, gauging the opinions of residents in the region in relation to traditional food consumption in order to assess their willingness to pay more for traditional and regional food.*

Keywords: *food consumption, food economy, traditional and regional products and food, Traditions-Flavours-Regions Collection*
(JEL code: M31)

INTRODUCTION

Food consumption is an integral part of everyday life in a society. I agree with POPOVICS (2009) that food is essential in people's lives. By the consumers, the highest share of expenditure is spent on food, and the most time on average per year is spent on buying food. Food consumption is both a compulsion and a source of pleasure; it also determines the lifestyle and rhythm of consumers and their social relations and can be traced back to the traditions of each culture. Nowadays, we are facing a shift in values: consumers are increasingly moving away from over-consumption, and when choosing between products, they focus on high-quality brands and brand and image benefits. Also, value orientation is becoming more critical in consumer behavior (TÖRŐCSIK, 2007). Hungarian traditional and regional food has a unique value in the food market; they are known for their high quality, distinctive flavor, and health benefits, which make them attractive to consumers.

Food economy and food consumption

The level of industrial development determines the level of economic development of a country and its regions. The level of development of other economic sectors, including agriculture, also depends on the level of industrial development. However, non-industrial sectors such as agriculture reflect the level of industrial development and the economy as a whole (BURGER, 1985). According to SZABÓ (1998), agricultural activity is defined as crop and livestock production activities that produce crop and livestock products for food consumption, animal feed, and industrial processing. The essential characteristic of the activity is that it is closely and inextricably linked to the agricultural land, especially in the case of crop production that is significantly exposed to climatic and weather conditions.

Agriculture can contribute to the economic growth of a region through:

- the labor provided by industry and other sectors,
- the food supply of a growing urban population and the supply of raw materials to industry,
- the capital and funds made available for industrial development,
- foreign exchange earnings, partly by substituting agricultural exports and partly by imports of raw materials from food and agriculture,
- a market for the absorption of industrial products,
- by promoting industrialization and the development of

other sectors of the economy (BURGERNÉ, 1980).

Agriculture and the food industry, which process raw materials into consumable products, together form the food economy, providing healthy food for the population. It is also essential for employment and contributes to a region's economic performance. The connection between agriculture and the food industry is established through procurement. Farmers are free to sell their agricultural products to anyone, and they produce to order, for self-sufficiency, or sale on the open market. In this way, agricultural products are sold through several channels, and producers are free to choose between these channels, in virtually all cases, on the basis of economic considerations. The most essential form of sale of agricultural products is the sale of goods based on a contractual relationship between producers and buyers, mainly food producers. Producers can also sell their products directly to farmers' markets, various outlets - open shops, market stalls, etc. - and retail, wholesale, catering, foreign trade businesses, public institutions, and foreign buyers. Extra-contractual production is primarily adjusted to expected solvent demand based on tradition, influenced by expected sales prices and the specific characteristics of economies (CSIZMAZIA et al. 2007).

Food consumption can be seen as a specific area important for both the individual and the economy. However, food consumption is motivated by general, everyday physiological needs, and food cannot be dematerialized or substituted by other products. It is essential that food consumption also reflects lifestyle and values (LEHOTA, 2004). According to VETŐNÉ (2013), food production and consumption are also connected and interlinked in many ways; therefore, food consumption and production and the technological developments supporting them can only be effectively understood together.

Food consumption is directly influenced by biological, psychological, sociological, anthropological, demographic, economic, and political factors. The role of biological factors is mainly related to the individual, the consumer. These factors include physiological differences based on genetic diversity, perception, and food-related diseases. Food-borne and non-food-borne diseases have a significant impact on diet and consumer behavior. Demographic factors affect food consumption by changing the size and structure of the population; for example, population decline in developed countries reduces per capita consumption. Among the economic factors, price and income play an essential role. Low-income people want access to sufficient quantities of food, while those on higher incomes tend to buy healthy and high-value-added products. The purchasing power of consumers' income and the price of particular goods influence how consumers respond to price changes. Social factors are social relations that may express membership or separation from particular groups. Cultural factors include individual, social, and psychological factors and components. It is essential to mention the value system, which also determines consumer behavior in the long term. Psychological factors influence the acceptance or rejection of a particular food by individuals and the significance and role of the accepted food (LEHOTA, 2004). Hungarian household consumption patterns are influenced by several factors, including income and demographic changes - more working women and single-person households, larger pensioner population - and lifestyle changes (HOFMEISTER-TÓTH et al. 2011). Using national consumption statistics, TRICHOPOULOU et al. (2002) compared food consumption patterns and changes over ten years in seven European countries. Their research has shown that the education level impacts the understanding and processing of health and environmental information.

Traditional and regional food on the food market

Traditional and regional products/food are defined as agricultural products that are produced traditionally, have a historical past, and are linked to a specific region where they are still present in today's food market. The terms traditional, national, and Hungarian can also be applied to these products found in their common Traditions-Flavours-Regions Collection. Regional and local products differ from the definition because they are connected to a narrower area, but their production is not linked to tradition. We define conventional, classic, or mass-produced products/food as those food products that are produced in large quantities under industrial conditions that also meet general standards, have no specific raw material or technological requirements, and are commercially available. Conventional products are differentiated by different branding in the commercial market. Organic, biological, or organic products/food may only come from farming practices that do not use artificial fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, growth regulators, or feed additives. Instead, the system is based on crop rotation, animal and plant fertilizers, manual weed control, and biological control of various pests (SZAKÁLY et al., 2010).

In 1993, the European Union launched the "Euroterroirs" (Europe's Countryside) program, a French initiative to collect traditional and local food from European regions also, support their economic exploitation, and promote them to consumers. Hungary was the first of the pre-accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe to join the program in 1998. The 'Traditions-Flavours-Regions' initiative aimed to collect traditional and regional food from the Hungarian regions and contribute to their promotion and economic exploitation (PALLÓNÉ KISÉRDI, 2003). To be included in the collection, a product must meet various criteria, such as its history, the traditional nature of the production method, the connection to the specific region, the knowledge and awareness of the product, and the existence of production and marketing (CSERHALMI et al. 2001).

The book contains a professional historical description of 300 traditional and regional products by region and within these by sector. Compared to the list of other European countries, the Hungarian collection is particularly rich in regional fruit and vegetables, which are more than one third of all products. The regional classification was based on the first authentic historical reference (SZAKÁLY et al. 2010).

Traditional and regional food products of the North Great Plain region

The natural and economic geography of the North Great

Plain region is favorable for agricultural production, and the differences in production areas allow for their specialization. The area's agriculture can provide a secure base for the previously established food industry, and most of the crops, livestock, and animal products produced in the region are supplied to domestic or foreign consumers while meeting local demand (CSIZMAZIA et al. 2007). The Northern Great Plain region is characterized by saline and sandy areas, black soils rich in humus on the borders of farms and gardens, and the products of livestock and crop production, such as the famous apples of the 'Szabolcs-Nyírség' region, the plums from' Beszterce' also the 'szatmári' plum jam and walnut' pálinka.' The quality of agricultural products and food is also significantly influenced by the local conditions, the physical environment, and the food habits and traditions associated with a particular region (CSERHALMI et al. 2001).

The Northern Great Plain region is included in the Traditions-Flavours-Regions Collection with 58 products, making it the second most prosperous region in terms of products in Hungary after the Southern Great Plain region. The typical product groups and products of the North Great Plain region are:

- Meat, poultry, game: Bronze turkey, Guinea fowl, Sheep from'Hortobágy', Hungarian goat, Hungarian grey cattle, White Hungarian hen, Hungarian curly-feathered goose, Roe deer;
- Meat products:' Csécsi' bacon,' Csemege Debrecen sausage; Smoked bacon with paprika,' Vállaji' Swabian ribbed bacon,' Vállaji' Swabian ham;
- Fruits grown, picked, and processed: Plums from' Beszterce,' Plums from' Penyige,' walnuts from' Milota,' Dried plums, Cherries from' Nagykörű,' Gypsy cherries, Sour cherries from' Debrecen," Pándy' sour cherries, Gooseberry from' Hajdúság,' Apples from' Szabolcs,' Dried apples, Dried pears;
- Vegetables grown, picked, and processed: Horseradish from' Hajdúság,' Potatoes from' Kisvárda,' Cabbage from' Hajdúság," Sziki' chanterelle mushrooms, Field carnation mushrooms, Pumpkins from' Nagydobos';
- Drinks:' Szatmári pálinka' from plums,' Pálinka' from walnuts,' Szabolcsi pálinka' from apple;
- Cereals and products of the milling industry: maize grits;
- Confectionery products: Jam from Cornus,' Szatmári' jam from plums;
- Confectionery and bakery products:' Debreceni vert' honey scones,' Debreceni vásári füzéres' pretzels,' Dübbencs,' Bread scones,' Kunsági' pretzels, Chimney cake, Matzo scone,' Vesu';
- Dairy products: Goat cream cheese, Goat curd, Rounded cottage cheese, Soft goat cheese,' Parenyica' cheese;
- Herbs, spices, seasonings: Poppy seeds,' Sziki' chamomile;
- Pasta: Spiral pasta, Knitted pasta,' Lebbencs' pasta;
- Others: Acacia honey from Nyírség, Roasted sunflower seeds (SZAKÁLY et al. 2010; CSERHALMI et al. 2001).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the primary research, I used a quantitative method through questionnaires. The questions mainly analyzed consumers' preferences, knowledge, purchasing habits, and risk management related to traditional and regional food. In the questionnaire survey, it was essential to assess the willingness to pay more for traditional and regional food and to determine conclusions about the crucial economic conditions for food production and the specificities of traditional and regional food consumption in the Northern Great Plain region. The questionnaire survey was conducted between 16 December 2019 and 22 May 2020, and during the data collection, only the responses of the inhabitants of the region were collected.

The survey was conducted exclusively online for the residents of the counties of Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok. The questionnaire was created using the Google Docs application, and participation in the survey was voluntary. The online questionnaire was available on a social networking site, and 1,349 people filled it out, all giving valid answers. The total sample size for the Northern Great Plain region was 1,349 (n=1,349).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

The demographic characteristics of the sample were categorized by gender, age group, educational level, and type of municipality of residence. Information was also requested on subjective income status and the household's per capita income. Women accounted for 85.6% of the respondents, and almost a quarter of them belonged to the 40-49 years age group, while the 30-39 years' and' 18-29 years age groups were nearly equally represented. Almost half of the respondents have a higher education level or live in cities with county status. The number of responses from municipalities with less than 2.000 inhabitants is relatively low. One-fifth of the respondents in the sample have a per capita family income of between 101-150 thousand HUF, 16.5% of them have over 200 thousand HUF, and 5% have less than 50 thousand HUF. The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

Presentation of the sample. (N = 1,349)		
Demographic groups	N	%
Gender		
Man	194	14.4%
Woman	1,155	85.6%
Age groups		
18–29 years	310	23.0%
30–39 years	315	23.4%
40–49 years	329	24.4%
50–59 years	220	16.3%
Over 60 years	175	13.0%
Education level		
Primary school	23	1.7%
Vocational school	164	12.2%
Graduation	521	38.6%
Higher education	641	47.5%
Type of settlement		
City of county status	642	47.6%
Settlement with over 10,000 inhabitants	347	25.7%

Settlement between 2,000–10,000 inhabitants	285	21.1%
Settlement with less than 2,000 inhabitants	75	5.6%
Per capita income in the household		
Less than 50 thousand HUF	68	5.0%
51–75 thousand HUF	143	10.6%
76–100 thousand HUF	215	15.9%
101–150 thousand HUF	276	20.5%
151–200 thousand HUF	210	15.6%
Over 200 thousand HUF	223	16.5%
No answer	214	15.9%

Source: Own elaboration.

Hypothesis tests

My research aimed to characterize and analyze the economic position of traditional and regional food and products among local consumers in the Northern Great Plains region. I focused on local specificities, asking the opinions of the region's inhabitants on the consumption of traditional and regional food and dishes to protect the domestic market and products and strengthen their competitiveness. Local and traditional products are mainly relevant for local businesses and tourism, so they are unsuitable for solving the region's deeper structural problems. However, they can help to develop the economy and meet the specific needs of different social groups through their' supporting' role.

The first hypothesis

H1: Local people who often eat traditional and regional dishes in their households also choose to eat them in catering establishments.

The survey asked how often local residents eat traditional Hungarian food in their households, and when they visit a catering establishment, how usually they choose traditional Hungarian food from the menu. The cross-tabulation analysis of the two variables and the frequency of consumption of traditional and regional food in the households, in the context of consumption of traditional and regional food in catering establishments, is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Frequency of consumption of traditional and regional food in the households, in the context of consumption of traditional and regional food in catering establishments.

		When you visit a catering establishment, how often do you choose traditional Hungarian dishes?			
		Mostly I don't choose (%)	**Sometimes yes, sometimes no (%)**	**Mostly I choose (%)**	**Total (%)**
How often do you eat traditional Hungarian food in your own household?	**No more than once a month (%)**	51,10%	38,30%	10,60%	100,00%
	No more than once a week (%)	23,80%	55,40%	20,80%	100,00%
	Several times a week (%)	11,10%	46,80%	42,10%	100,00%
	Daily (%)	5,70%	32,40%	61,80%	100,00%
	Total (%)	13,70%	44,80%	41,50%	100,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

The association between the two variables was found to be significant ($p<0.01$) when tested by Pearson's chi-square ($\chi 2$) test, meaning that the frequency of eating traditional food at home is associated with the frequency of eating traditional food when visiting catering establishments. Since both variables form an ordinal scale, I also tested this relation with a Spearman correlation, which has a value of 0.33, $p<0.001$. The latter means that the more often one eats traditional food at home, the more often one eats it in a catering establishment. The magnitude and pattern of this relation can be seen more clearly in the row percentages in Table 2. The table shows that as the frequency of eating at home increases, there is a monotonic increase in the proportion of people who would mostly choose traditional Hungarian food in catering establishments (10.6%, 20.8%, 42.1%, 61.8%). At the same time, there is a monotonic decrease in the proportion of people who would mostly not choose traditional Hungarian food in catering establishments (51.1%, 23.8%, 11.1%, 5.7%).

Overall, the hypothesis H1 is confirmed.

The second hypothesis

H2: Local residents who often eat traditional and regional food in their own households consider it important that these products are produced using local ingredients.

Table 3 below presents a cross-tabulation analysis of the variables—the frequency of consumption of traditional and regional food in the households in relation to the importance of using local ingredients.

Table 3. The frequency of household consumption of traditional and regional food in relation to the importance of using local ingredients.

		How important is it to you that a food product is made using local ingredients?			
		Very relevant (%)	Relevant (%)	Irrelevant (%)	Total (%)
How often do you eat traditional Hungarian food in your own household?	No more than once a month (%)	2,00%	34,70%	63,30%	100,00%
	No more than once a week (%)	13,30%	58,80%	27,90%	100,00%
	Several times a week (%)	19,30%	64,20%	16,50%	100,00%
	Daily (%)	33,10%	56,90%	10,00%	100,00%
	Total (%)	20,90%	60,30%	18,80%	100,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

The relation between the two variables was found to be significant ($p<0.01$) when tested using Pearson's chi-square ($\chi 2$) test, which suggests that the frequency of eating traditional food at home is associated with the extent to which consumers consider that it is essential that a food product is produced by using local ingredients. The two variables form an ordinal scale, so I also tested the relation using the Spearman correlation. The value of the Spearman correlation is 0.33, $p<0.001$. This means that the more often a resident consumes traditional food in his/her household, the more critical it is for him/her to use local ingredients. The row percentages in Table 3 show that, as the frequency of consumption at home increases, the proportion of consumers who consider it relevant to the importance of using local ingredients increases monotonically (2.0%, 13.3%, 19.3%, 33.1%). In addition, the proportion of consumers who do not consider its importance is monotonically decreasing (63.3%, 27.9%, 16.5%, 10.0%).

Overall, the hypothesis H2 is confirmed.

The third hypothesis

H3: Local residents who often choose traditional Hungarian food in catering establishments are willing to pay more for a food product which is made from traditional local ingredients.

Table 4. The relation between the frequency of choosing traditional Hungarian food in catering establishments and the willingness to pay for food produced from traditional local ingredients.

		Would you pay more for a food product made from traditional local ingredients?			
		Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)	Total (%)
When you visit a catering establishment, how often do you choose traditional Hungarian dishes?	Mostly I don't choose (%)	2,00%	34,70%	63,30%	100,00%
	Sometimes yes, sometimes no (%)	13,30%	58,80%	27,90%	100,00%
	Mostly I choose (%)	19,30%	64,20%	16,50%	100,00%
	Total (%)	20,90%	60,30%	18,80%	100,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

When tested by Pearson's chi-square ($\chi 2$) test, the relation between the two variables was found to be significant ($p<0.01$). This suggests that the frequency of choosing traditional Hungarian food in a catering establishment is associated with the willingness of a local resident to pay more for a food product that is made from traditional local ingredients. The two variables form an ordinal scale with a Spearman correlation of 0.33, $p<0.001$. This means that the more often consumers choose traditional Hungarian food in a catering establishment, the more willing they are to pay more for food that is made from traditional local ingredients. The row percentage data in Table 4 show that as the frequency of choosing traditional Hungarian food in a catering establishment increases, the willingness to pay for a food product made from traditional local ingredients increases monotonically (2.0%, 13.3%, 19.3%). In addition, the proportion of consumers unwilling to pay more for this food product decreases monotonically (63.3%, 27.9%, 16.5%).

Overall, the hypothesis H3 is confirmed.

I used the Kruskal-Wallis test to compare the commitment to traditional and regional food of groups based on each background variable - age, type of settlement, and household per capita income. I characterized the level of commitment along four questions:

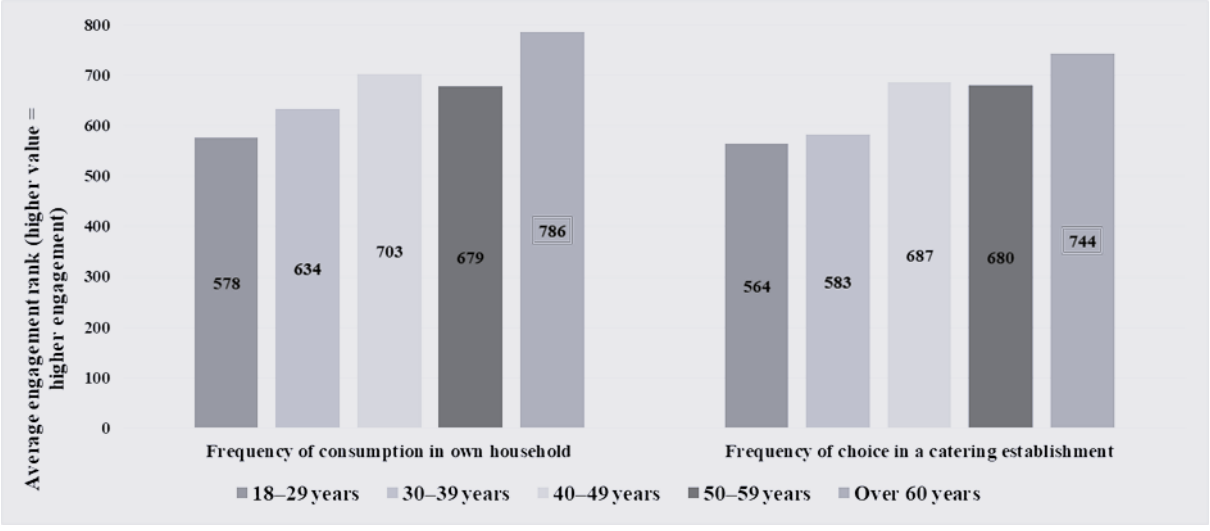
- How important is it for you that the food product is produced by using local ingredients?
- Would you be willing to pay more for a food product that is made from traditional local ingredients?
- How often do you eat traditional Hungarian food in your household?
- When you visit a catering establishment, how often do you choose traditional Hungarian food?

The fourth hypothesis

H4: As age increases, the level of commitment to traditional and local food among local residents rises.

The level of commitment to traditional and regional food for each age group was compared using the Kruskal-Wallis test, with significant differences at $p<0.01$. The level of commitment to traditional and regional food for each age group of local residents is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Level of commitment to traditional and local food for each age group of local residents.



Source: Own elaboration.

In the case of the variables local ingredients and willingness to pay, the lower the values of the question, the higher the commitment, so for both the importance of local ingredients (average rank: 584) and willingness to pay (average rank: 566), the' over 60 years age group is the most committed to traditional and local food. The 18-29-year-old age group has the lowest level of commitment based on the average rank values of the importance of local ingredients (756) and willingness to pay (739).

For the variables frequency of consumption in one's own household and frequency of choice at the catering establishment, higher values indicate higher commitment. The' over 60 years' age group consume traditional Hungarian food most often in their own household (average rank: 786) and choose traditional Hungarian food most often in catering establishments (average rank: 744). The' 18-29 years age group is the least engaged (average rank: 578 and 564).

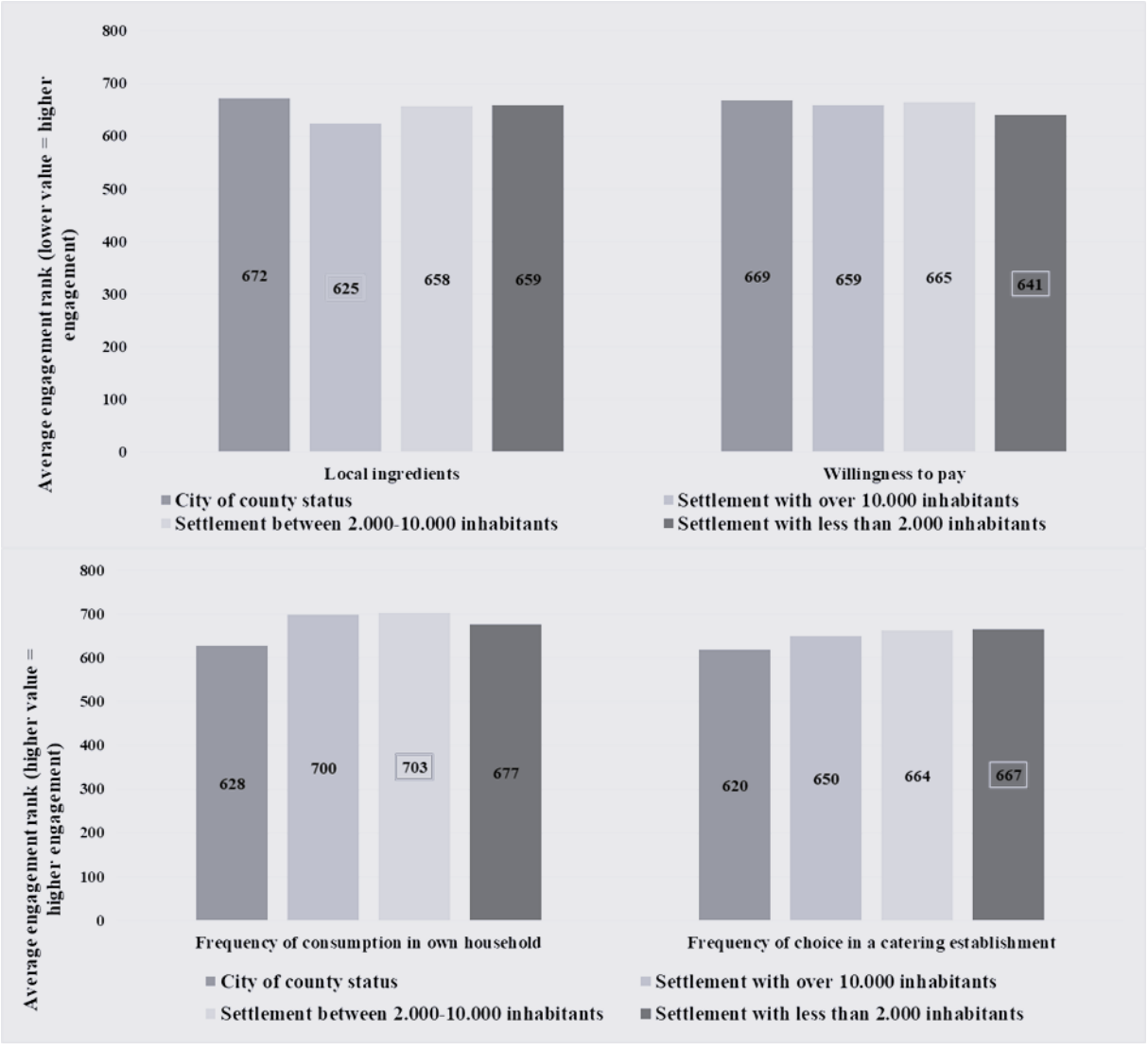
Overall, the hypothesis H4 is confirmed.

The fifth hypothesis

H5: In some regional municipalities, the commitment to traditional and local food increases as the number of inhabitants decreases.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare residents' commitment to traditional and regional food in each settlement type, with a significant difference between settlement types, $p<0.01$. The level of commitment to traditional and local food for each type of settlement is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Level of commitment to traditional and local food for each type of settlement.



Source: Own elaboration.

For consumers living in settlements with over 10,000 inhabitants, it is most important that a food product is produced using local ingredients (average rank: 625). However, willingness to pay is highest in settlements with less than 2,000 inhabitants (average rank: 641). In both cases, the level of commitment is the lowest in cities with county status (average rank: 672 and 669).

In their households, people living in settlements with between 2.000 and 10.000 inhabitants eat the most often traditional Hungarian food (average rank: 703), while people living in settlements with less than 2.000 inhabitants most often choose to eat in catering establishments (average ranking: 667).

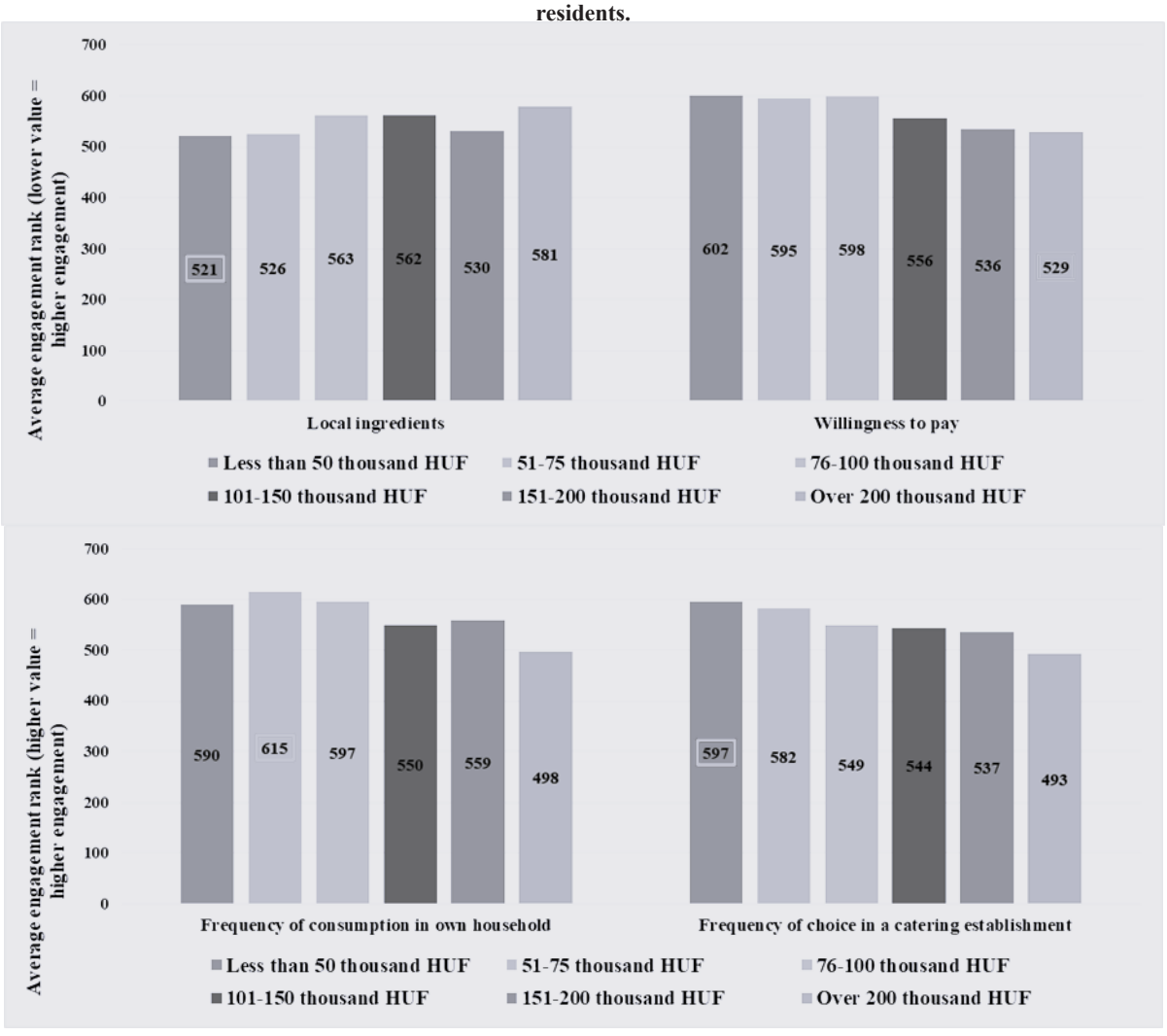
Overall, the hypothesis H5 is partially confirmed.

The sixth hypothesis

H6: As the household's per capita income decreases, the level of commitment to traditional and local food increases.

I compared the commitment of consumers in each income group to traditional and regional food using the Kruskal-Wallis test, with a significant difference between groups, $p<0.01$. The level of commitment to traditional and local food as a function of the income per capita in the families of local residents is shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. The level of commitment to traditional and local food as a function of the income per capita in the families of local residents.



Source: Own elaboration.

Residents of the region are most committed to using local ingredients if their per capita family income is less than 50 thousand HUF (average rank: 521). In comparison, consumers are most willing to pay more for a food product made from traditional local ingredients if their per capita family income is over 200 thousand HUF (average rank: 529).

The highest frequency of consumption in own households belongs to the income group between 51 and 75 thousand HUF (average rank value: 615), and the highest frequency of choices in catering establishments belongs to the income group with a per capita family income of less than 50 thousand HUF (average rank value: 597). In both cases, the least committed consumers are those whose per capita family income is over 200 thousand HUF (average rank values: 498 and 493).

CONCLUSION

Traditional and local food can contribute to economic growth and tax revenues in the region:

- provide opportunities for industry to develop production, start-up small and medium-sized enterprises, and create jobs in underdeveloped areas;
- provide more choice in the retail and catering sectors, allowing a higher proportion of locally produced food products to be used locally;
- can be used in rural development programs to promote and boost tourism, for example, through the organization of taste tours and themed events;
- enhance the overall attractiveness and image of the region and the country (SZAKÁLY et al. 2010).

Local people like to buy and consume traditional and local food that they find attractive and valuable. As a result of the research, the following correlations can be established:

- as the frequency of eating at home increases, there is a monotonic increase in the proportion of people who would prefer to eat traditional food in restaurants;
- as the frequency of consumption in the home increases, the proportion of people for whom a traditional food product must be made using local ingredients is growing monotonously;
- as the frequency of choosing traditional Hungarian food

in catering establishments increases, the willingness to pay for food made from traditional local ingredients increases monotonically;

- in terms of the importance of local ingredients and willingness to pay, the' over 60 years age group is the most committed to traditional and local food, and they are the most likely to consume traditional Hungarian food in their own households, also catering establishments,
- for consumers living in settlements with over 10.000 inhabitants, it is essential that a food product is produced using local ingredients, while the willingness to pay is highest in settlements with less than 2.000 inhabitants;
- in their own households, people living in settlements with between 2.000 and 10.000 inhabitants most often eat traditional Hungarian food, while people living in settlements with less than 2.000 inhabitants most often choose it in catering establishments;
- consumers with a per capita family income of over 200 thousand HUF are most willing to pay more for a food product made from traditional local ingredients, and the income group of 51-75 thousand HUF has the highest consumption frequency in their own households;
- inhabitants of the region with a per capita family income of less than 50 thousand HUF are the most committed to using local ingredients, and they are also the most likely to choose traditional Hungarian dishes in catering establishments.

It is an important objective to ensure that Hungarian consumers prefer domestic food products, because more production and sales of traditional and local food products would provide local people with the opportunity to gain employment and income, which is essential for better living conditions and economic growth in the future.

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