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AUTHENTICITY VERSUS COMMERCIALIZATION: PRESERVING HERITAGE IN OVERTOURISM

Marija Lakićević¹; Milica Bošković Žarevac²; Vladan Petrović³

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between the preservation of cultural heritage authenticity and the commercialization of the tourist experience in tourism-intensive destinations, with a particular focus on Vrnjačka Banja, the most visited spa in Serbia. The objective of the research is to identify the key challenges faced by local communities and institutions in balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the protection of cultural identity. The methodology employed in this study integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches, encompassing the analysis of tourist flows, visitation statistics, and the documentation of local cultural programs. The findings indicate a mounting trend of commercialization in the tourism sector, a development that, while fostering economic growth, also poses a threat to the cultural authenticity of local communities. The findings suggest the implementation of integrated tourism strategies grounded in sustainable management and the active involvement of the local community.

Key Words: *authenticity, commercialization, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism, Vrnjačka Banja*

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¹ Marija Lakićević, PhD, Full professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Vojvođanska bb, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja, marija.lakicevic@kg.ac.rs

² Milica Zarevac Bošković, PhD, Professor of Applied Studies, Academy of Applied Studies Šumadija, Kosovska 8, Kragujevac, zarevac.milica@gmail.com

³ Vladan Petrović, PhD student, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Vojvođanska bb, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja vladanpetrovicvb@outlook.com

Introduction

Cultural heritage and tourism constitute a significant category of modern tourist activities, yet their relationship involves complex challenges. In cultural tourism, authenticity is defined as a faithful and unaltered presentation of cultural elements that confirms their true value to visitors. Conversely, commercialization involves transforming cultural content into commodities for tourist consumption, often resulting in the loss of original context and intrinsic meaning (Li & Li, 2022). Tourist-intensive destinations experience high visitor flows, which can negatively impact local life and the destination itself, a phenomenon known as overtourism.

Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in global tourism by enhancing destination appeal, promoting economic growth, generating employment, and preserving local communities. Tourism provides direct income from accommodation, catering, and souvenirs, as well as indirect benefits, such as the preservation of historic buildings and the diversification of rural economies (Petrović & Barović, 2019). However, intensive tourism development may create conflicts between economic interests and the need to preserve cultural identity, as commercialization can homogenize cultural content and reduce perceived authenticity.

The key research question is: *How can a balance be achieved between cultural identity preservation and tourist exploitation?* Analyzing the preservation of cultural authenticity alongside commercial practices that shape the tourist offer allows for identifying approaches to sustainable destination development. This study specifically focuses on Vrnjačka Banja, the most visited spa in Serbia, to examine the challenges of maintaining cultural authenticity under the pressures of intensive tourism (Pantović et al., 2023).

The concept of cultural authenticity in tourism

In contemporary tourism studies, cultural authenticity is central to understanding interactions between tourists and locals and the quality of tourist experiences. It is a complex, multidimensional concept that encompasses both objective heritage relations and subjective experiences of tourists and local actors (Cao et al., 2025). Over time, authenticity has evolved from a simple "real vs. fake" distinction to a relational, constructivist, and experiential category within the tourist encounter. One of the most influential approaches to understanding authenticity in

tourism distinguishes several key dimensions, including objective authenticity, constructivist authenticity, and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity is defined as referring to physical or historical “originals”, including authentic artifacts, sites, or traditional practices that exist independently of observers (Phat et al., 2025).

Constructivist authenticity posits that authenticity is socially and culturally constructed through the expectations and interpretations of tourists and service providers. Existential authenticity places emphasis on the subjective experience of the individual, thereby engendering a sense of authentic engagement with a particular place, people, or traditions, irrespective of historical accuracy. The pursuit of authentic experiences can lead communities to create “staged authenticity,” producing performances that cater to tourists rather than reflecting genuine cultural practices (Zhang, 2024).

Authenticity exerts a substantial influence on destination management and tourism product development. Tourists frequently seek experiences they perceive as “authentic” and “local”, which in turn affects satisfaction, loyalty, and destination reputation. However, commercialization can potentially diminish perceived authenticity by transforming local practices and artifacts into standardized products catering to the tourist market.

Commercialization of cultural assets and effects on the local community

The commercialization of cultural goods refers to the transformation of cultural elements into market-oriented products and services for tourist consumption. In this process, cultural heritage shifts from being a source of identity and memory for local communities to a commodified attraction for tourists (Floričić & Floričić, 2019). This is especially pronounced in highly visited urban and historic destinations, where cultural content is adapted to commercial demands. A related phenomenon, “Disneyfication”, describes the simplification and standardization of cultural expressions into visually appealing, marketable forms aligned with tourist expectations rather than authentic local practices (Zhang, 2024).

The phenomenon of commercialization exerts a significant influence on local communities, manifesting in both economic and sociocultural

dimensions. The process of commercialization has the potential to generate employment opportunities, elevate income levels, and stimulate investments in infrastructure. However, it is important to note that the distribution of these benefits is often uneven. Moreover, commercialization can exacerbate overtourism, leading to heritage deterioration, disruption of local life, loss of traditional occupations, and the commodification of cultural practices (Vicol, 2024). For instance, Venice illustrates how tourism and commercialization can reshape a destination, with overtourism shifting the local economy toward tourist-oriented services like souvenir shops, fast food, and short-term rentals. This has led to rising living costs, depopulation of urban cores, and significant changes to the city's cultural landscape (Bertocchi et al., 2020).

Dubrovnik, which has gained recognition through popular culture, including the Game of Thrones series, exemplifies the concept of "staged authenticity." This phenomenon involves the utilization of architectural and historical assets as backdrops for tourist-oriented activities, such as filming tours and themed excursions. This practice has been observed to contribute to the proliferation of mass tourism, thereby impeding the preservation of local cultural traditions and daily life. (Abbasian et al., 2020). Santorini, predominantly regarded through the lens of landscape and aesthetics, exemplifies the repercussions of the digital and visual allure of an "Instagram destination" on the economic and cultural dynamics of the island. Visually driven tourism frequently marginalizes local traditions and cultural practices that lack commercial or media appeal. (Leka et al., 2025).

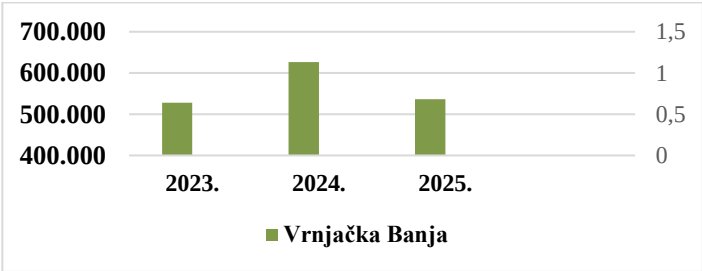
Vrnjačka Banja between authenticity and tourist commercialization - challenges and perspectives

Vrnjačka Banja is widely regarded as one of the most significant tourist destinations in Serbia, owing to its long-standing reputation for spa tourism, cultural richness, and extensive historical heritage. According to the official data of the Republic Institute of Statistics, in 2024, Vrnjačka Banja was among the most visited spa centers in the country, achieving more than 626,200 tourist overnight stays. This achievement thus confirms its leading position in the spa segment, ahead of Sokobanja and Banja Vrdnik. Despite a general decline in overnight stays at spa centers in Serbia in 2024 compared to the previous year (a decrease of 9.2%), Vrnjačka Banja exhibited a notable increase of 18.5% in the number of

overnight stays, indicating the destination's resilience in the face of broader trends (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Statistical data demonstrate that Vrnjačka Banja has also been identified as the most visited spa in terms of the number of guests, with 187,861 visitors recorded in one of the most recent seasons. In March of 2024, spa centers emerged as the most sought-after tourist destinations in Serbia, underscoring their enduring significance within the nation's tourism infrastructure (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024).

In spa destinations, the number of overnight stays recorded from January to September of 2025 was approximately 1.9 million, indicating a 7.6% decrease compared to the same period in the previous year. The majority of tourists were from the Republic of Serbia, accounting for 81.4% of total arrivals. Vrnjačka Banja emerged as the most visited spa destination, receiving 536.7 thousand visitors, while Sokobanja ranked second with 381.3 thousand visitors. The second and third most popular destinations among tourists were Banja Vrdnik, which received 179,900 visitors, and Banja Koviljača, which received 138,600 visitors. The remaining spa destinations experienced lower levels of visitation (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2025).

Figure 1: *Trend in overnight stays in Vrnjačka Banja between 2023 and 2025.*



Source: *Authors according to Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024 and Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2025.*

These data confirm that Vrnjačka Banja continues to attract a significant number of domestic and foreign tourists, but at the same time point to the dynamic challenge of preserving cultural authenticity due to the pressure of tourism commercialization. The increased frequency of visitors has been shown to affect the transformation of the setting, the offer, and the urban dynamics of the spa. This transformation includes the development of supporting infrastructure, hotel facilities, tourist services, and cultural

programs. However, these programs are often oriented mainly to market demands rather than to the historical and cultural credibility of the destination.

Research on local attitudes in Vrnjačka Banja regarding major events such as “Lovefest” and the “International Vrnjačka Carnival” shows both positive and negative tourism impacts. Đorđević et al. (2021) found that “Lovefest” is often perceived negatively due to overcrowding, traffic congestion, parking shortages, and increased noise, with negative effects rated higher than positive ones (Đorđević et al., 2021a). Similarly, research on 300 respondents identified traffic congestion and parking limitations as key negative impacts of the “International Vrnjačka Carnival” (Đorđević et al., 2021). Additional findings confirm that tourism has significant environmental impacts, particularly through crowding (Đorđević & Milićević, 2020), while socio-cultural effects are also notable (Đorđević & Milićević, 2020). Economic dissatisfaction is further linked to rising prices of real estate, goods, and services, identified as a major negative consequence in a study of 140 respondents (Đorđević & Milićević, 2021).

In this context, the process of commercialization has the potential to result in a reliance on uniform tourism products and experiences that are not necessarily aligned with local cultural identities. This phenomenon is exemplified by the expansion of tourist capacities and the diversification of touristic offerings, which often results in the marginalization of local cultural elements and traditions. Consequently, this process frequently leads to the homogenization of the tourist experience and a concomitant diminution of the perception of authenticity. Simultaneously, spa tourism in Vrnjačka Banja possesses the capacity to safeguard cultural identity through the implementation of strategic plans. These plans encompass the conservation of historical buildings, the organization of local events, and the provision of educational programs that affirm authentic tourist values.

The transformational sustainability of tourism in Vrnjačka Banja poses a multifaceted challenge, namely the need to balance the preservation of authentic cultural, historical, and natural values with the pressure of commercialization of the tourism product. On the one hand, Vrnjačka Banja is recognized for its long-standing reputable image of spa and health tourism, which encourages the growth of the number of visitors and the development of hospitality and tourism infrastructure. Conversely, excessive commercialization can result in the erosion of a

destination's distinct identity and cultural attributes, a decline in the quality of the tourist experience, and the degradation of the natural environment. The fundamental challenges lie in achieving a balance between economic prosperity and the preservation of authenticity. This balance can be achieved through the application of the principles of sustainable development, capacity planning, diversification of the tourist offer, and the active involvement of the local community in the decision-making process. Transformational sustainability perspectives imply the strategic orientation of tourism towards the long-term preservation of the values of the destination, with commercial development functioning as a means, not an end in itself (Verances et al., 2024).

Therefore, it is imperative that the tourism development strategies in Vrnjačka Banja be predicated on the principles of sustainability. These principles encompass the balancing of economic benefits and the protection of cultural assets, as well as the active involvement of local communities in tourism program planning. This approach would enable the spa to maintain its appeal as both a tourist destination and a venue for promoting cultural authenticity within the context of contemporary commercial tourism.

Conclusion

Preserving cultural authenticity in destinations such as Vrnjačka Banja is a complex challenge shaped by growing tourism demand and commercialization, which can alter cultural expression and threaten local traditions. While tourism brings important economic and infrastructural benefits, it also requires balancing development with the protection of cultural identity. This study contributes the tension between commercialization and authenticity in Vrnjačka Banja, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourism's impact on local cultural identity.

To ensure the sustainable management of the destination, an integrated approach is recommended, one that includes the active participation of local communities in the planning and development of tourism programs. The education of tourists and the promotion of cultural experiences that reflect historical and traditional values contribute to strengthening awareness of the importance of authenticity. In addition, the implementation of projects aimed at the protection and revitalization of cultural and historical buildings is imperative. Furthermore, the

diversification of tourism products must be pursued, reducing pressure on the destination's central areas while supporting local culture. The implementation of these measures enables Vrnjačka Banja to maintain its appeal to tourists, while preserving its identity and authenticity. This approach fosters the long-term sustainable development of the destination and the preservation of its distinct cultural character.

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