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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4603.28

Evaluating the Attractiveness and Authenticity of Cultural Heritage Sites: A Case Study of Ojców National Park

ABSTRACT

The quest for authenticity is often cited as a key trend in cultural tourism. However, some researchers argue that contemporary tourism increasingly undervalues authenticity when assessing the attractiveness of sites. This article examines these perspectives through a case study of Ojców National Park (ONP), analyzing data from Tripadvisor, Google, Polskie Szlaki, and ZamkoMania websites to evaluate the popularity and appeal of cultural heritage sites within the park. The study investigates how tourist opinions and ratings correlate with their perceptions of authenticity. It finds that authenticity is a significant factor for only a small segment of visitors to ONP, and there is notable variability in how authenticity is understood. Tourists often struggle to accurately and consistently evaluate the authenticity of attractions such as historic buildings, including castles and ruins.

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage, protection of cultural heritage, authenticity, Tripadvisor, Ojców National Park

STRESZCZENIE

Atrakcyjność i autentyczność obiektu dziedzictwa kulturowego w opinii turysty – studium przypadku Ojcowskiego Parku Narodowego

Poszukiwanie autentyczności, zdaniem części badaczy, jest jednym z głównych trendów w turystyce kulturowej; w odmiennym stanowisku współczesną turystykę charakteryzuje spadek znaczenia autentyczności w ocenie atrakcyjności obiektów. Na podstawie analizy danych pozyskanych z internetowych agregatorów opinii, w tym serwisów Tripadvisor, Google, Polskie Szlaki i ZamkoMania, dokonano oceny popularności i atrakcyjności obiektów dziedzictwa kulturowego na terenie Ojcowskiego Parku Narodowego. Zwrócono uwagę na potencjalny związek wystawionych przez turystów opinii i ocen z percepcją autentyczności obiektów. Autentyczny charakter wybieranych

Suggested citation: Warcholik, W. (2024). Attractiveness and authenticity of the cultural heritage site as perceived by the tourist – a case study of the Ojców National Park. © ⓘ *Perspectives on Culture*, 3(46), pp. 449–460. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4603.28

Submitted: 25.11.2022

Accepted: 30.09.2023

atrakcji jest elementem wpływającym na doświadczenie niewielkiego odsetka turystów przebywających w OPN, a dodatkowo różnią się oni w rozumieniu autentyczności. Turyści mają problem z jednoznaczną i poprawną oceną autentyczności atrakcji turystycznych, jakimi są zabytkowe budowle, przykładowo zamki i ruiny zamków.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: dziedzicwo kulturowe, ochrona dziedzictwa kulturowego, autentyczność, Tripadvisor, Ojcowski Park Narodowy

Introduction

The quest for authenticity is often regarded as the core of cultural tourism. This quest manifests in various ways, such as the desire to engage with local communities and experience their environments (search for a sense of place) or to connect with historical remnants and the past (search for a sense of history). Consequently, many scholars argue that authenticity represents the fundamental and most significant motivation behind cultural tourism practices (Chhabra, Healy & Sills, 2003).

National parks are vital areas where protective measures have successfully preserved traces of a place's history and its inhabitants, encompassing both material and spiritual cultural heritage (Graja-Zwolińska & Spychała, 2016; Tilden, 2019). This paper will explore the role of authenticity in evaluating heritage sites visited by tourists in Ojców National Park (ONP, Polish: Ojcowski Park Narodowy, OPN). Established in 1956, ONP is the smallest national park in Poland, spanning 21.63 km² and located in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship, just a few kilometers from Krakow. It encompasses the rugged terrain of the 12 km long Prądnik Valley and the lower section of the 5 km long Sąspowska Valley.

The Prądnik Valley and its surroundings are among the most intriguing locations in Central Europe, renowned for their rich natural, cultural, and landscape diversity. ONP is distinguished as one of the few national parks in Europe with such a high concentration of cultural assets within a relatively small area. The park is home to 43 historic buildings owned by various entities, including the park itself, private individuals, the church, and other institutions such as the Wawel Royal Castle and the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Turystyczno-Krajoznawcze). Beyond its natural and cultural wealth, ONP features a well-preserved spatial order that exemplifies the harmonious coexistence of natural and cultural heritage assets (Partyka & Sołtys-Lelek, 2019).

The analysis of the collected data will focus on evaluating the popularity and attractiveness of cultural heritage sites within Ojców National Park. The subsequent phase will involve investigating the potential relationship between tourists' ratings and their perceptions of the authenticity of these sites. Additionally, the study will explore whether tourists' opinions reveal issues such as the significance of site authenticity, the erosion of authenticity at cultural heritage sites, and the emergence of a distorted image of these sites driven by increasing tourism demands.

According to F. Tilden (2019), the popularization of cultural heritage is achieved through interpretation, which involves assessing authenticity to foster understanding, which leads to appreciation, and ultimately, protection. National parks, with their tourism dimension, attract those interested in human activity traces (Stasiak, 1997). A significant body of work explores the integration of cultural and natural tourism elements within national parks (Wall Reinius & Fredman, 2007; Bruno, Gasca & Monaco, 2014; Tilden, 2019).

Authenticity has increasingly been recognized as a critical factor in tourist decision-making (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Taylor, 2001) and as a key determinant of the quality of tourist attractions (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986; Nowacki, 2017). Several studies have also attempted to classify places based on their authenticity (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986). The concept of authenticity is extensively discussed in tourism research (Chhabra et al., 2003; Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Taylor, 2001) and has garnered interest from tourism sociologists and anthropologists (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1976; Urry, 1990), as well as tourism marketing researchers (Frochot & Batat, 2013; Zemła, 2014).

Evaluating the Authenticity of Tourist Experiences and Attractions

To gauge tourists' opinions on attractions, researchers employ a range of established and innovative tools. Traditional methods like survey questionnaires are commonly used, while newer approaches, such as the flow-simplex method (Vittersø et al., 2000; Kruczek, 2002), offer alternative perspectives. Additionally, online aggregators of reviews and ratings play a significant role in assessing the popularity and appeal of tourist sites.

For this study, qualitative data was gathered through tourists' feedback on their experiences in Ojców National Park (ONP), while quantitative data was obtained from facility ratings on Tripadvisor. To ensure

comprehensive coverage, evaluations were also sourced from Google Maps, Polskie Szlaki, and ZamkoMania. Furthermore, the study incorporated insights from a literature review and the author's extensive participatory and observational experience as a licensed guide in ONP, including guiding at cave sites within the park.

Tripadvisor reviews are widely utilized in tourism research, with a growing body of work examining their reliability and impact (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Fili & Križaj, 2016). Numerous studies analyze reviews of various tourist attractions and services sourced from Tripadvisor (Adamiak & Dubownik, 2017; Nowacki, 2017; Zajadacz, 2017; Zemła & Siwek, 2020).

As a multifaceted search engine and major tourism information technology platform, Tripadvisor functions as a social networking site and hosts the largest global community of travelers. Its significance has increased alongside the rise in both tourist numbers and internet usage in various regions (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Zajadacz, 2017). Alongside Tripadvisor, other popular platforms include Google Maps Local Guides, Lonely Planet, Expedia, Yelp, Zomato, Booking.com, Airbnb, and Kayak.

For this study, data from Tripadvisor reviews were collected for all sites within Ojców National Park up to December 2021. Reviews were accessed under the 'Things to do' tab and, for Korzkiew Castle, under the 'Hotels' tab. These reviews were submitted in various languages, including English, German, Russian, Portuguese, Italian, French, Hungarian, Dutch, Spanish, and Polish, with Polish reviews making up 73.3% of the total.

Results

The extensive array of tangible heritage sites within Ojców National Park is inadequately represented in tourist reviews on opinion aggregators. Among the twenty sites listed across Tripadvisor, Google, Polskie Szlaki, and ZamkoMania, only eight are classified as tangible cultural heritage sites, eight are natural heritage sites, and four – Łokietek Cave, Ciemna Cave, Okopy Hill, and Spring of Love – are perceived by tourists as either natural or cultural heritage.

Tourist reviews are concentrated on a limited subset of sites. Notably, Pieskowa Skala Castle, the most frequently reviewed site, accounts for nearly 45% of all feedback on ONP sites. Castles dominate the reviews, with Pieskowa Skala, the ruins in Ojców, and Korzkiew Castle in the park's buffer zone collectively receiving 67% of all ratings. In contrast, the cultural heritage associated with the site of Blessed Salomea in Grodzisko and its potential for cultural tourism remain almost entirely overlooked.

No villa facilities in the Prądnik Valley received ratings from tourists. Among the industrial sites, only two out of eleven milling sites were reviewed: the Tarnówka Mill in Grodzisk and Boroniówka. Of the nearly forty religious sites within Ojców National Park, only the Blessed Salomea Hermitage complex in Grodzisk and St. Joseph the Craftsman's Chapel on the Water received ratings. The latter site is mentioned alongside the former "Pod Łokietkiem" hotel, now the ONP Education and Museum Centre, as a modest representative of the historical spa buildings in Ojców. Notably, the heritage related to the January Uprising, including crosses, graves, and plaques, was not addressed in tourist reviews.

In the 2021 ranking of ONP's most significant attractions, the Boroniówka milling settlement received the highest acclaim. Tourists praised Boroniówka for the "nice" owners, who "passionately restored the old mill," noting their meticulous attention to detail and the heartfelt effort put into maintaining the site.

Table 1. Ratings of the most important attractions within the ONP according to Tripadvisor, Google, Polish Trails and ZamkoMania (December 2021)

		(1) Tripadvisor	(2) Google	(3) Polskie Szlaki	(4) Zamko- Mania	Average 1+2+3
		Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	
1	Castle in Pieskowa Skała	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.3	4.5
2	Castle in Ojców	3.5	4.3	4.3	3.8	4.0
4	Łokietek Cave	4.5	4.5	4.5		4.5
5	Dark Cave	4.0	4.5	4.4		4.3
7	Chapel on the Water	4.5	4.8	4.4		4.6
9	ONP Museum	4.5	4.5	4.4		4.5
11	Boroniówka	5.0	4.8	5.0		4.9
12	Spring of Love	3.5	4.5	4.2		4.1
13	Hermitage of Blessed Salomea	4.0	4.9	4.4		4.4
14	Okopy Hill	–	–	4.7		4.7
19	Tarnówki Mill	–	–	3.9		3.9
20	Castle in Korzkiew *	5.0	4.6	4.2	–	4.6

* – the castle in Korzkiew in the ONP buffer zone.

Source: own study.

The analysis of written feedback on Tripadvisor revealed 666 distinct threads from tourists, which were categorized for review (see Table 2). The majority of these threads were positive, accounting for 78% of the total feedback. The sites with the highest percentages of positive reviews included Korzkiew Castle (93%), Boroniówka (91%), Łokietek's Cave (86%), and St. Joseph the Craftsman's Chapel on the Water (83%). Conversely, the sites with the highest percentages of negative feedback were Spring of Love (72%) and Ojców Castle (46%).

Table 2. Content analysis of reviews of cultural sites in ONP on Tripadvisor

Threads included in the feedback	Total	Castle in Pieskowa Skala	Castle in Ojców	Castle in Korzkiew	Boroniówka	Chapel on the Water	Hermitage of Blessed Salomea	Castle Park	Łokietek's Cave	Dark Cave	Spring of Love
Number of threads raised in opinions	666	286	84	152	22	12	8	2	43	39	18
Threads raised in a negative context	149	65	39	11	2	2	2	0	6	9	13
Threads raised in a positive context	517	221	45	141	20	10	6	2	37	30	5
Lack of authenticity	19	9	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	8
Aesthetic aspect – exterior (unattractive facility)	4	–	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
Aesthetic aspect – unattractive interior	1	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Lack of atmosphere, feel of the place	5	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	4	–
Unsuccessful restoration/reconstruction	3	–	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Poor quality of services /ticket prices, organisation, staff/	80	44	16	9	2	2	–	–	4	3	–
Not very interesting site, nothing interesting	34	11	13	–	–	–	2	–	2	2	4
Lack of environmental qualities, unattractive surroundings	2	–	2	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Authenticity of the place	42	18	9	11	1	–	–	–	–	2	1
Aesthetics – exterior (beautiful facility)	85	52	12	11	2	6	2	–	–	–	–

Aesthetic aspect – attractive interior	71	25	–	25	4	–	–	–	11	6	–
Successful restoration/reconstruction	47	28	–	16	3	–	–	–	–	–	–
Atmosphere, feel of the place	66	11	7	24	4	2	3	1	5	9	–
High quality of service /ticket prices, organisation, staff/	100	31	–	39	4	–	–	–	17	9	–
Interesting facility	22	11	1	–	4	2	1	1	2	–	–
Environmental qualities, attractive surroundings	86	45	16	15	–	–	–	–	2	4	4

Source: own compilation based on text reviews on Tripadvisor (as of November 2021).

Tourists rarely comment on the authenticity of attractions, with such feedback comprising only 8% of all positive reviews. When authenticity was highlighted positively, it most commonly pertained to Pieskowa Skała Castle, Korzków Castle, and Ojców Castle. In contrast, more significant themes in the feedback included the quality of services (19%), the external aesthetic qualities of the sites (16%), and the surrounding assets (16%). Notably, the most frequent negative comments centered around the quality of services, accounting for 54% of all negative reviews.

For the top-rated site in ONP, Boroniówka, the concept of authenticity is reflected in tourist feedback as a “great living history lesson,” providing the rare opportunity to witness “for the first time how flour was traditionally milled” and to appreciate efforts in “saving history from destruction and oblivion.” This emphasis on historical preservation is encapsulated in comments such as: “A settlement revived with great respect for history.” A key factor contributing to its high rating was the chance to sample home-baked goods and purchase ‘organic’ flour milled on-site. The opinions about the Korzkiew castle resound with admiration for the attention to detail and appreciation of the “great idea to restore the castle and bring it back to life.” The aspect of authenticity appears in the opinions not only in the material context, but also of experiences. It is appreciated that the owner has done a wonderful job restoring this ruin to life, maintaining the character of an authentic historic place.

Tourists have highlighted that Pieskowa Skała is more than just a visually stunning castle set within the magnificent scenery of Ojców National Park; it is also celebrated for its authentic ambiance and meticulously maintained artifacts. However, criticisms of the castle’s authenticity have emerged. For instance, tourists have expressed dissatisfaction with the sparse descriptions of the numbered artifacts and the additional charge for the “Italian garden,” which was merely a series of hedges with vacant spaces for flowers. Negative reviews have described the interior as having

“literally two chambers and a courtyard” and noted a sense of “emptiness” within the castle.

Regarding Ojców Castle, tourists frequently express disappointment over the minimal remnants of its former grandeur. Extremely negative reviews describe the site as a “disappointment” and a “rip-off,” with some critics labeling it an “embarrassment” and a “stretch.” Visitors have remarked that, aside from an old well and a small watchtower, there is little of interest, leading some to question whether it can even be considered a castle. Several reviews suggest that the castle is in a state of disrepair, with comments like “the castle has been demolished and is waiting to be rebuilt.” In the case of the Spring of Love, tourists in their opinions do not comment on its arrangement according to J. Żółciak’s design and in cultural terms point out that it was originally located just under the Krakowska Gate, but since the road was built “the water flows underground through pipes, so the spring is a bit artificial.” Tourists call for “reconciling legend and reality,” i.e. “either make the water potable or moving the spring to a place where the outflowing water can be drunk.”

An intriguing case of cultural heritage assessment in the Ojców National Park area involves the buildings at Grodzisko. The site, identified by some tourists, guides, and researchers as the Hermitage of Blessed Salomea, is believed by some to include remnants of a castle erected by Silesian Duke Henry the Bearded in 1228 (Rokosz, 1995). This castle, known as “Skala” or “Scala,” is thought to have remained in use until the late 13th or early 14th century. However, S. Kołodziejski (1996) challenges this claim, arguing instead that the castle was situated in Sułoszowa, approximately 4 km northwest.

Similarly, the St. Joseph the Craftsman’s Chapel on the Water has sparked intriguing local legends. Its placement on the Prądnik stream has led some to speculate that it was intentionally built “on water” to circumvent Tsar Nicholas II’s decree prohibiting the construction of religious buildings on “land” (Lerka, 2006). This legend, frequently cited by tourists and featured in written tourist sources and guided tours, is likely a misconception. In reality, the chapel’s location was more likely a practical adaptation of existing wooden spa baths to meet the needs of both visitors and local residents.

Discussion and conclusions

The numerous opinions and evaluations from the aggregators analyzed in this study reinforce D. Ziarkowski’s (2011) hypothesis that attraction selection is heavily influenced by what D. MacCannell (1976) describes as the “sacralisation of the view.” MacCannell suggests that less popular sites,

such as the Hermitage of Blessed Salomea in Grodzisk, could benefit from increased promotion to tourists and visitors. This appeal is evident from the relatively low rankings of Grodzisk's church in terms of both the number of reviews and attractiveness ratings compared to more prominent cultural sites within ONP. Statistically, the church in Grodzisk is three times less recognized as a sacred site and the Hermitage of Blessed Salomea is twice less known compared to the St. Joseph the Craftsman's Chapel on the Water (Hibszer, 2013).

When evaluating the attractiveness and authenticity of cultural heritage sites in Ojców National Park (ONP) from the perspective of tourists, it is essential to consider E. Cohen's (1988) observations on tourist awareness and the role of tour operators. Group tours in ONP are strictly regulated, with visitors only allowed under the guidance of authorized experts. Each guide is permitted to lead a maximum of 50 participants. This structured approach largely influences how tourists experience and seek authenticity, often directing them away from what Cohen (2011) terms "the superficiality of frequently inauthentic attractions."

The distinction between individual tourists and those visiting ONP in organized groups is particularly relevant when examining the three factors influencing the quality of experiences related to authenticity, as identified by M. Żemła (2014). These factors include the varying duration of contact between the tourist and the attraction, the ability to verify authenticity, and the significance of aesthetic experiences.

Furthermore, the findings of M. Żemła & M. Siwek (2020) that tourists often struggle to accurately assess the authenticity of historic buildings are confirmed by this study. This challenge is largely due to how these sites are presented, interpreted, and the unique atmosphere they provide. The significance of authenticity in shaping the tourist experience varies depending on the nature of the attraction (Żemła, 2014). For instance, with historic buildings like the castles in ONP, tourists often have limited means to verify authenticity. Without expert knowledge or access to reliable and current information, tourists find it challenging to objectively assess the authenticity of these sites.

The numerous negative reviews of Ojców Castle reflect a disconnect from the intellectual and sensual fascination with ruins and their natural processes of decay and fragmentation, as discussed by Boym (2010). The results from a comparative analysis of three Polish castles – the Royal Castle in Warsaw, Bobolice Castle, and Pszczyna Palace (Żemła & Siwek, 2020) – align with these observations. In both studies, a segment of tourists values the objective authenticity of the sites they visit and rejects contemporary reconstructions or staged authenticity. However, this group remains a minority, and their views do not represent the broader public of visitors.

Replacing an original object with a replica and explaining this to tourists should, in theory, lead to a notable decline in their satisfaction with the visit. However, research by A.M. von Rohrscheidt (2010) and M. Żemła (2014) suggests that tourists often find it difficult to discern between an authentic object and its replica, meaning their overall satisfaction might remain unaffected. The case of the Spring of Love, relocated due to road construction in the Prądnik Valley, does not provide conclusive evidence either way due to the limited number of reviews. Nonetheless, some comments have highlighted concerns about the “artificiality” of the site. On the other hand, examples such as St. Joseph the Craftsman’s Chapel on the Water, which has undergone significant functional changes, and the indeterminate original location of Grodzisko, support the notion that tourists may not prioritize the object’s authenticity or historical accuracy. What seems to matter more to visitors is their direct engagement with something perceived as unique or extraordinary, often described as the “nimbus of authenticity” (Mikos von Rohrscheidt, 2010; Żemła, 2014).

Tourist attractions that rank highly in visitor reviews are often viewed as “magnets” – sites that inspire admiration and awe. In the context of the Ojców National Park (ONP), the top-rated heritage sites include the castles in Pieskowa Skała, Ojców, and Korzków. As stated by A. Zajadacz (2017), the infrequency of examining tourist dissatisfaction with these top attractions. This is particularly relevant to the ONP, where numerous low ratings and negative opinions have been recorded, especially concerning the castle ruins in Ojców.

A notable observation is that many sites not only lacked reviews but were also not evaluated at all. When evaluating cultural heritage sites in the ONP, issues related to tourism organization and service quality often overshadow discussions of authenticity. This suggests that the experience of a significant number of visitors is influenced more by factors such as service quality rather than the inherent authenticity of the sites.

The concept of authenticity is a significant factor for only a small fraction of ONP visitors, and perceptions of authenticity vary widely among them. Concerns about the loss of authenticity and the creation of a “falsified” image due to tourism demands are mentioned only marginally in tourist reviews. Tourists frequently struggle to accurately assess the authenticity of historical attractions, including castles and ruins. The quality of the visitor experience is more closely related to how the site is presented and how the heritage is interpreted rather than the site’s intrinsic authenticity.

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