



CULTURAL VALUES, TOURISM VALORIZATION AND AUTHENTICITY: THE CASE OF VRNJAČKA BANJA

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Abstract:

In recent years, there has been an increasing research interest and potential of cultural heritage tourism. The potential of the Republic of Serbia's cultural legacy has, however, received little attention. The paper, after providing a theoretical framework in the context of cultural heritage tourism, analyzes the impact of tourism commercialization and authenticity on the loyalty and satisfaction of tourists in Vrnjačka Banja using PLS-SEM method. The results of this study make it possible to identify the potential for new segments of tourism and new tourist offers. The originality of the paper belongs to the development of the emerging forms of tourism. The paper will show how, in an innovative way, the needs of tourists can be met with the abandoned ruins of old villas and new tourist products can be created.

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INTRODUCTION

Based on previous research, a new form of tourism market has emerged – the one that is multidimensional (Guerra *et al.*, 2018). The new market form indicates an increased sensitivity to the preservation of local culture and the overall authenticity of the vacation experience. In order for a tourist place to be competitive in modern tourist trends, the original preservation and authenticity of the attraction is necessary. Taking this into account, cultural tourism, as a selective form of tourism (Zadel & Bogdan, 2013), has the potential to become a very important type of tourism in terms of quantity and quality – that is to say, cultural tourism is becoming a global trend (Tien *et al.*, 2019).

Vrnjačka Banja boasts numerous medicinal springs with rich mineral waters, a variety of beautiful forms of relief, its cultural wealth and folklore, as well as an advantageous geographic location. The place is rich in tourist resources, both natural and cultural. Despite all the resources it possesses, they are not fully utilized. Vrnjačka Banja is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Republic of Serbia, according to statistics on visitor numbers, and its attractiveness is just one of the factors that contribute to this opinion.

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For example, in 2022, Vrnjačka Banja was visited by 207,559 domestic and foreign tourists. In addition, it is the second most visited tourist destination in Serbia, behind the country's capital Belgrade (The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023).

This tourist form should be constantly improved and diversified, the quality of services must be raised, and history and origin must be promoted in order to enhance attendance and, more specifically, to increase the number of days tourists stay at the destination through promotion of slow tourism activities (Losada & Mota, 2019). Three forms of tourism have been developed in this most visited spa in Serbia: health tourism, sports-recreational and excursion, city tourism. In addition to the aforementioned forms, cultural tourism is the type of tourism with the highest economic potential in this location.

This paper underlines the value of the cultural facilities and resources that Vrnjačka Banja has in the context of the commercialization of cultural tourism. It does so with an eye toward the future. The paper uses the PLS-SEM methodology in order to measure the impact of tourist valorization on the tourist perception of authenticity and satisfaction in the context of cultural heritage tourism in Vrnjačka Banja.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL VALUES AND TOURISM VALORIZATION

Recognizing the close relationship between art and science, cultural values and scientific research, the authors Lorusso *et al.* (2016) highlighted the importance and possibilities of protecting and improving the cultural heritage of a community. According to the mentioned authors, it is very important that the products of the human community are understood not only as habitats and historical memories of man and the relationship between people and material wealth, but also as a cultural heritage that are testimony to the evolution of the spirit and culture of people throughout the centuries (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021).

Cultural heritage (whether tangible or intangible) represents a shared social wealth. In addition to enhancing the lives of hundreds of millions of people and serving as a valuable resource for economic growth, employment, and social cohesion, cultural heritage is also a part of irreplaceable knowledge, an inspiration for thinkers and artists, and a catalyst for the cultural and creative industries. (La Bara *et al.*, 2018). The nation's standing in the world and its appeal as a location for living, working, and tourism are largely determined by its cultural heritage and the methods used to maintain and enhance it. Cultural heritage is a shared good and resource. Cultural heritage generates both direct and indirect benefits, whereby some authors call it double public good (Sable & Kling, 2001). The advantages are both economic in nature (concerning the growth of employment, investment, tourism, services, infrastructure, and trade) and social in nature (i.e., the development of human capital, the formation of a shared identity, the role modeling of strong relationships of cooperation between citizens), resulting in the general rise in the standard of living and wealth of living (Alexandrakis *et al.*, 2019; Fusco Girar & Vecco, 2021).

The literature emphasizes the high importance of tourism valorization when determining the value and importance of the destination heritage and the content offered by the destination. In this sense, the authors Bjeljic *et al.*, (2013) state that the valorization of tourism is key to creating strategic plans for a destination. Tourism valorization proves to be effective when all communities participate in the process (both local population and tourists) of finding authenticity and differentiating between tourist offers. With regard to this, the authors Bizzarri & Micera (2021) take as their starting point the fact that every community has its own local history and cultural heritage (material and immaterial), which, when passed on to tourists, becomes a tourist experience. However, as Gračan *et al.*, (2010) suggest, it is necessary to keep in mind that cultural resources represent the heritage of the local population, which should not be damaged by tourism and economic valorization.



Shi & Pande (2022) defined the commercialization of tourism as one of the phenomena of mass tourism products based on attaching market values to a destination. Commercialization is the term used to describe the business interaction between the destination's tourism-related goods and activities. (Kaul, 2007; Shi *et al.*, 2019). In fact, as authors Levi & Kocher (2009) pointed out, commercialization happens as a result of the tourism sector's efforts to standardize the tourist experience while still pursuing authentic experiences. But, as Grofelnik (2021) pointed out, the appealing geosites and their tourism-related valorisation are still not properly covered, despite their numerous benefits. Apart from that, studies have revealed that the decline of hospitality has a direct impact on how tourism affects tradition, family values, and cultural commercialization (Daly, 2021).

Currently, the majority of European destinations are in the mature stage of the development life cycle, and it is necessary to create new products that will make the destination sustainable (Dimitrijević *et al.*, 2022; Fowler *et al.*, 2022). In fact, as Franch *et al.* (2008) point out, many destinations need destination reengineering, which is based on the analysis of tourists' motivations and behavior. Many authors start from the importance of the question of authenticity for the motivation of a destination. According to recent studies, authenticity plays a crucial role in the construction of cultural tourists' pleasure (Lu *et al.*, 2015; Engeset & Elvekrok, 2015; Domínguez-Quintero *et al.*, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2019; Domínguez-Quintero *et al.*, 2020). As presentation, interpretation, and verification directly affect visitors' motivation to come and interact with historical tourism sites, it is crucial for the tourism industry to comprehend the authenticity of cultural attractions (Bryce *et al.*, 2015).

The development of authenticity in the context of commercialization is linked to the author Trilling (1972), who has developed an original study within a museum with a special emphasis on economic evaluation. Later, the phrase was used to refer to tourism in general, particularly cultural tourism and the valuing of artifacts there. Authenticity in tourism is frequently linked to tourist accommodations, locations, attractions, and experiences (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). MacCannell (1973) integrated authenticity into sociological research in an effort to comprehend tourists' travel and site-seeing experiences. A global evaluation of the "truthfulness of a tourist destination" is how MacCannell defines a destination's authenticity. Three elements of authenticity can be highlighted, namely: objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, and existential authenticity, according to authors Park *et al.*, (2019) detailed's investigation of various approaches and interpretations of authenticity.

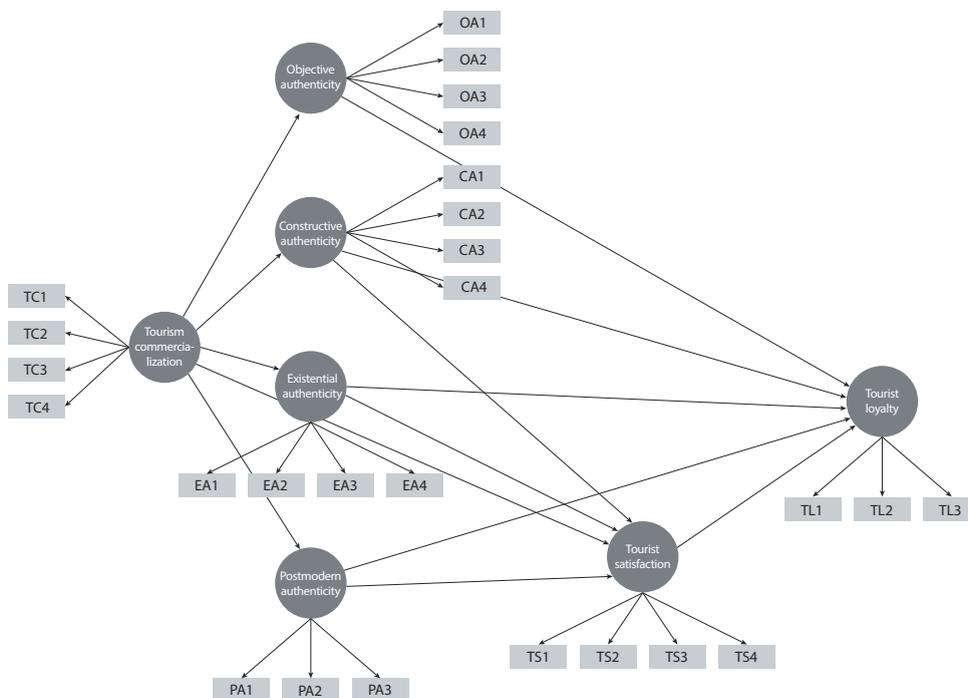
In a thorough analysis of various ways and interpretations of the idea of commercialization of tourism, Zhang, Yin & Peng (2021) found that it can have a positive impact on tourists' perceptions of authenticity as well as their satisfaction in the context of cultural heritage tourism. The empirical research of these authors has shown that the commercialization of tourism has a favorable impact on tourists' objectivity, constructivity, existential authenticity, and postmodern satisfaction. The originality or actual authenticity of tourist attractions is referred to as "objective authenticity." (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Items like cultural heritage authenticity are used in this study to measure objective authenticity. Existential authenticity is concerned with the element of experiences occurring at a place of cultural heritage without a tangible object (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Constructive authenticity is the idea of authenticity that results from social constructions and perceptions made by tourists (Nguyen & Cheung, 2016). Constructive authenticity, as it relates to this study, looks at whether a historic site can be altered and rebuilt. Postmodern authenticity describes artifacts that are reproduced, imitated, or even created. This definition of heritage begins with the idea that heritage is all that the visitor perceives as heritage in his imagination (Weaver, 2011).



METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This study sought to determine how authenticity affects visitors' pleasure with and allegiance to a variety of connected sites and their historical significance. It was believed that several variables were likely to affect various sorts of loyalty. The study region comprised Vrnjačka Banja, a spa town in the Republic of Serbia with more than a 150-year history as a tourist destination. Vrnjačka Banja is one of the few places that has successfully preserved the old residential architecture and recognizable architectural style. Vrnjačka Banja is inhabited and authentic – what is more, the phrase "old spa villa" is exclusively associated with Vrnjačka Banja as there is no other place in the Republic of Serbia having more than 180 old authentic villas. The Serbian government preserved part of it and marked it as a cultural monument of great importance. Several protected cultural assets of Vrnjačka Banja are located in the Information System of Immovable Cultural Property under the auspices of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia – Belgrade (the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia, 2023). This has made Vrnjačka Banja a historically well-known place, but the product is insufficiently valorized in terms of cultural tourism.

Figure 1. Theoretical model



Source: Authors

From June to November 2021, a formal survey was being carried out at the major attractions and their located regions in the analyzed area, utilizing a random sample on-site. Domestic tourists were the target respondents. The idea of a survey questionnaire was applied to the research. The questionnaire was created based on a review of the literature (Park *et al.*, 2019; Zhang *et al.*, 2021) and was customized to the unique characteristics of the investigated cultural heritage tourism. The questionnaire had four parts. The first part explored tourism commercialization; the second part was about authenticity (objective, constructive, existential and postmodern authenticity). Four items were utilized in the following section to measure visitor satisfaction. The loyalty concept in relation to the first three parts was the emphasis of the fourth section. The demographic data of the respondents was then covered in a different section.



The analysis of the data revealed 111 genuine responses. The statistical software SPSS 19.0 and SmartPLS 3.0 were used to examine the data. Model validity analyses, correlation studies and structural equation modeling were done in order to assess the set of hypotheses.

Table 1. Latent variables and question scales

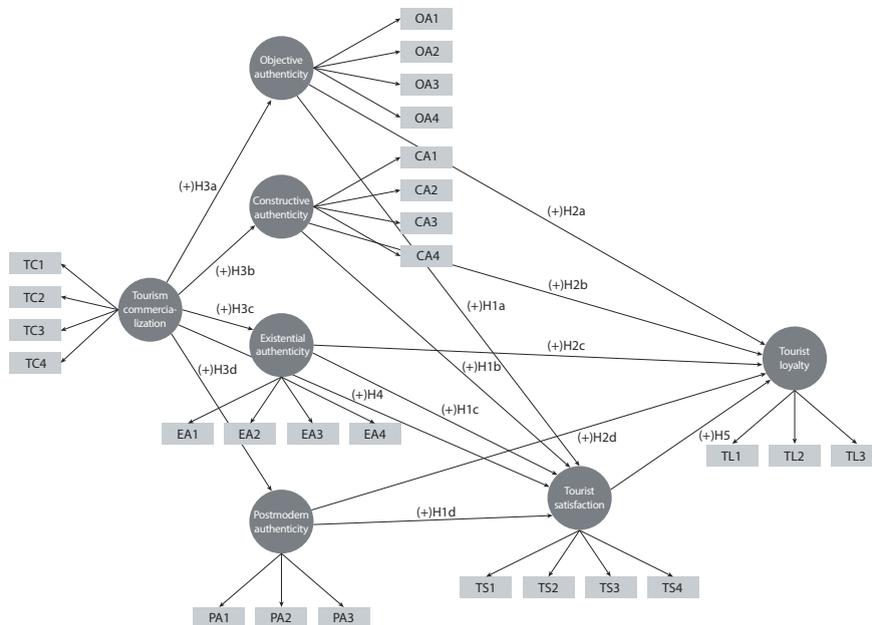
Latent variables	Label	Questions
Objective authenticity	OA1	The old villas in Vrnjačka Banja are well preserved.
	OA2	The cultural and historical value of the old villas is recognized by the authorities.
	OA3	The architecture is mostly original.
	OA4	The history of villas is documented and known.
Constructive authenticity	CA1	The old villas are proof of the old way of life.
	CA2	The old villas represent the local past.
	CA3	The old villas represent the former culture of Vrnjačka Banja.
	CA4	Old villas represent local traditions from the past.
Existential authenticity	EA1	I believe that a tour of old villas would bring something new into my everyday life and relax me.
	EA2	I believe that a tour of the old villas would allow an authentic relationship with the local population
	EA3	I feel that a tour of the old mansions would give me a sense of accomplishment.
	EA4	I believe that visiting the old villas would allow me to meet other tourists who have the same interests as me.
Postmodern authenticity	PA1	The buildings of old villas can be an example of the construction of new buildings in the traditional style.
	PA2	Modern technology can enhance the authentic experience of old villas (3D rendering of the original exterior, architecture, etc.).
	PA3	The authenticity of old villas is not my primary motive, it is more important for me to have a good time visiting them.
Tourism commercialization	TC1	I would pay the entrance fee to see the old villas.
	TC2	I would buy souvenirs with motifs of old villas.
	TC3	I would book a tour to visit the old villas.
	TC4	I would use catering services in old villas.
Tourist satisfaction	TS1	By including the old villas in the tourist offer of Vrnjačka Banja, all my expectations from the tourist destination will be fulfilled.
	TS2	I think it is worth investing money and time in visiting the old mansions.
	TS3	The offer of old villas will improve my tourist experience of Vrnjačka Banja.
	TS4	The offer of old villas will improve my satisfaction with Vrnjačka Banja.
Tourist loyalty	TL1	If new products and services are included in the tourist offer of Vrnjačka Banja, I would visit it again.
	TL2	Enriching the tourist offer with Vrnjačka Banja villas would be a reason for me to visit Vrnjačka Banja again.
	TL3	I would come with friends and relatives to visit Vrnjačka Banja Villas.
	TL4	Vrnjačka Banja villas would be interesting content for my social networks.

Source: Authors



All the previously mentioned researches helped in creating hypotheses for testing the model. First, the original model by Park *et al.*, (2019) and Zhang *et al.* (2021) was taken into account. After that, in subsequent iterations, the questions were adapted to the research area.

Figure 2. Theoretical model



Source: Authors

Based on the questions asked, and the evaluation of the answers the aforementioned authors had been given, hypotheses were defined in a positive direction. The hypotheses are illustrated in Figure 2 (H1-H5).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

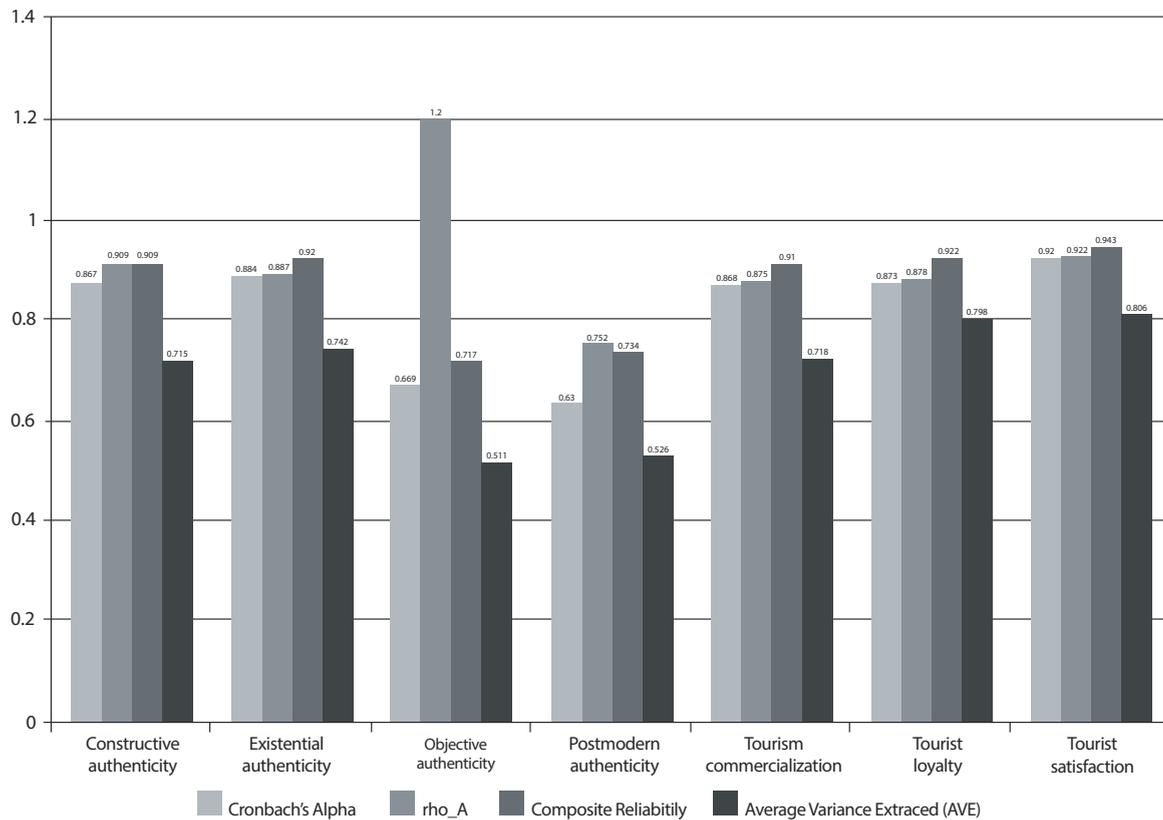
Out of 111 respondents, 36.94% were male and 63.06% were female. Their age ranged from 18-25 years, most of whom (69%) were 56+ years old. The respondents' primary motive for visiting Vrnjačka Banja was to see their family and/or friends (40%), gain new knowledge (32%), physical and mental relaxation (21%), and to see cultural and historical sites (6%). Many of the respondents were interested in cultural tourism (90%), while only 10% of respondents were not interested in any form of cultural tourism. As many as 85.59% of respondents had visited Vrnjačka Spa more than 7 times. The majority of respondents had a university degree (61%). Lastly, only 33% of respondents had heard that Vrnjačka Banja had over 100 old historical villas, despite the fact that most of them had visited the place more than 7 times.

During the statistical analysis of the data, the validity and reliability of the set model was first assessed. It is typically evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (Castro & Roldán, 2013) and composite reliability and Rho A (Hair *et al.*, 2021). The degree to which a scale includes a representative sample of items or whether the items appropriately reflect the concept's content domain is referred to as construct validity (Nannally, 1978; Chin, 1998). Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess internal consistency. Nannally (1978) points out that values greater than 0.6 are considered satisfactory, which indicates that in this case the prerequisite of internal consistency of the observed model is met. Average variance extracted



(AVE) reveals how much of a construct's variance is attributable to its indicators versus how much is attributable to error. The suggested value of this indicator is $AVE \geq 0.5$ (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Also, a composite reliability statistic greater than 0.6 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) is considered acceptable. The reliability and validity indicator values of all constructs per group are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Reliability and validity of the model



Source: Authors

Figure 3 demonstrates that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient above the suggested value and the composite reliability statistic for all constructs in this study is greater than 0.6, indicating the existence of construct reliability and validity. Additionally, Table 2 demonstrates that all AVE values are higher than the cutoff of 0.5; more specifically, the AVE values are higher than 0.511 which means that the associated construct accounts for at least 51.1% of the variation in the chosen indicators (Hair *et al.*, 2021; Lakićević *et al.*, 2021). The discriminant validity of the measurement model is examined as the next stage in evaluating its quality. The degree to which a specific construct differs from other constructs is referred to as its discriminant validity. The Fornell-Larcker criterion is applied in this situation to approximate discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE level for each construct should be bigger than the correlation between the constructs, according to the Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion (off-diagonal values).



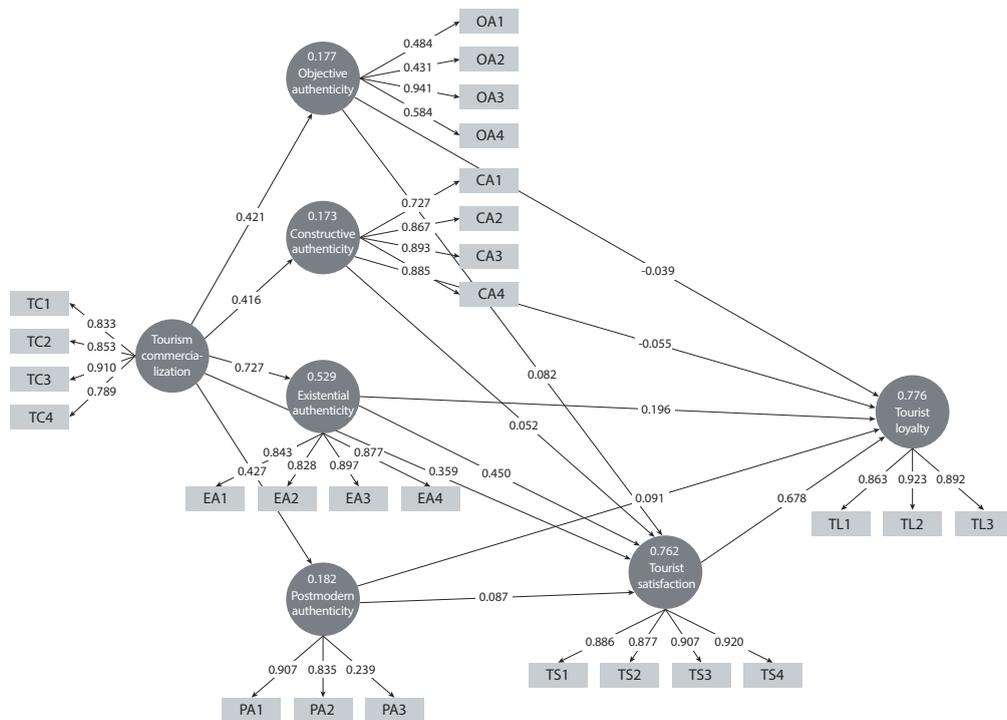
Table 3. Discriminant validity according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Constructive authenticity	Existential authenticity	Objective authenticity	Postmodern authenticity	Turist commercialization	Turist loyalty	Turist satisfaction
Constructive authenticity	0.846						
Existential authenticity	0.551	0.862					
Objective authenticity	0.283	0.388	0.641				
Postmodern authenticity	0.702	0.554	0.319	0.725			
Turist commercialization	0.416	0.727	0.421	0.427	0.847		
Turist loyalty	0.518	0.784	0.37	0.558	0.716	0.893	
Turist satisfaction	0.534	0.82	0.451	0.553	0.78	0.869	0.898

Source: Authors

As shown in Table 3, all off-diagonal values are lower than the square root of AVE (values in bold). All of the quality indicators for the measurement model point to a conclusion that it is extremely satisfactory. In order to test the hypotheses, the PLS SEM methodology was applied to the data at the level of the set model. The results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Results of the tested model



Source: Authors



Details of the parameter estimations for the tested model are shown in Figure 4, along with the outcomes of the tested hypotheses. A total of 17 hypotheses were examined. Upon examining hypothesis H1a, we come to the conclusion that objective authenticity had a favorable impact on visitor satisfaction ($\beta=0.082$), albeit the statistical value is not significant ($p>0.001$) – therefore, we cannot be convinced that this hypothesis is confirmed. In view of this, satisfaction in cultural heritage tourism is not much impacted by objective authenticity. Additionally, when testing the second hypothesis, constructive authenticity has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction ($\beta=0.052$), but it also has no statistically significant value ($p=0.512$). However, existential authenticity had a significant positive impact on tourist satisfaction in cultural heritage tourism ($\beta=0.450$) and the relationship is statistically significant ($p=0.000$). In this regard, it was determined that existential authenticity significantly affects tourist satisfaction, as well as postmodern authenticity ($\beta=0.087$). It is demonstrated that only existential authenticity among the authenticity characteristics influences cognitive loyalty in a favorable and statistically significant way. Since H1a, H1b, and H1d are only partially supported, it may be said that H1c is entirely supported.

They demonstrate that only existential authenticity has a favorable, significant impact on cognitive loyalty in cultural heritage in terms of authenticity elements that affect visitor loyalty. Hypotheses H2a and H2b can be completely rejected, considering the negative coefficients (-0.039 and -0.005). Postmodern authenticity in influencing tourist loyalty has a positive coefficient, but not statistically significant, so it can be partially supported. On the other hand, hypothesis H2c is confirmed and statistically significant, considering the positive regression coefficient of 0.196 .

Bearing in mind that the direct variables of authenticity are not fully supported when it comes to tourist satisfaction and loyalty in cultural heritage, the indirect effects will be further analyzed, which means the inclusion of tourist commercialization. In this case, within all the defined hypotheses, strong positive relationships were realized that are also statistically significant, supporting the complete confirmation of hypothesis H3 (H3a, H3b, H3c and H3d). The commercialization of tourism benefits perceived tourist authenticity, especially objective authenticity (H3a: $\beta = 0.421$; $p < 0.001$), constructive authenticity (H3b: $\beta = 0.416$; $p < 0.001$), existential authenticity (H3c: $\beta = 0.727$; $p < 0.001$) and postmodern authenticity (H3d: $\beta = 0.427$; $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the commercialization of tourism has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction (H4: $\beta = 0.129$, $p < 0.01$), which, in turn, positively affects tourist loyalty (H5: $\beta = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$). As a result, the remaining two hypotheses (H4 and H5) were also supported in addition to the hypothesis H3.

CONCLUSIONS

Vrnjačka Banja villas represent part of the history of Vrnjačka Banja its cultural heritage. They represent valuable and rare places in the entire Republic of Serbia, where with their historical and architectural significance and the stories that each of them carries, they remain embedded in Serbian cultural values. And as long as tourists have sight as a visual sense, they can enjoy this unforgettable experience. This in no way diminishes the importance of villas. For example, Vrnjačka Banja had over 180 old villas owned by notable people of the Republic of Serbia. In addition, tourism as an economic activity in this spa has existed for over 150 years (Borović Dimić, 2014). However, what tourists may not be able to see is the view from another angle, i.e. the current state of a large number of old villas. However, the history and culture of Serbia is quite appealing to those who are interested in cultural tourism and cultural heritage. The story of Vrnjačka Banja villas is crucial in that respect, and their fate as a tourist attraction is interesting because it reveals the tension between the preservation of heritage attractions and the generation of economic income.



Several conclusions can be drawn from the results of the study. First of all, the objective authenticity in tourism of the cultural heritage of Vrnjačka Banja significantly affects the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists. Most importantly, existential authenticity has the most significant impact of all authenticity factors on tourist loyalty and satisfaction. Additionally, visitor satisfaction has a significant positive impact on visitors' devotion to visiting Vrnjačka Banja's cultural heritage. As a result, tourists' general opinion of the value of tourist attractions creates a favorable attitude toward the veracity of the cultural legacy (in this case, Vrnjačka Banja villas). Second, the commercialization of tourism has a favorable effect on tourist satisfaction.

All of this suggests that tourism commercialization and satisfaction in the area of cultural heritage have a favorable empirical link. Alternatively, cultural heritage tourism can also be seen as a business activity in the first place, according to Mckercher & du Cros (2002). Commercialization, in particular, enhances the tourism experience at cultural heritage sites by generating a variety of travel-related goods, better hotel accommodations, and more thorough tourist information. All this leads to the conclusion that the commercialization of tourism can not only satisfy the needs of tourists, but also enhance and their satisfaction.

The proposed model has limitations and difficulties in the practical implementation of the proposed visits (tourist tours, experience tourism and virtual tourism, bicycle tours, quadricycles), according to the characteristics of each specific case. The reality of spa cultural tourism is very complex (actors, mobility management, business models, management, planning, sustainability...) and it was impossible to cover all those aspects in detail. In this sense, one of the shortcomings is not delving into the theoretical and conceptual framework, with a more comprehensive review of the definition of spa cultural tourism and the idea of sustainability of tourism. For a truly sustainable future, it would be of interest to empirically and practically apply cultural heritage tourism and biocultural tourism as a combination of man and nature.

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KULTURNE VRIJEDNOSTI, TURISTIČKA VALORIZACIJA I AUTENTIČNOST: SLUČAJ VRNJAČKE BANJE

Rezime:

Poslednjih godina postoji sve veća zainteresovanost za istraživanje i potencijal turizma koji se zasniva na kulturnom nasleđu. Međutim, potencijalima kulturnog nasleđa Republike Srbije nije posvećeno dovoljno pažnje. U ovom radu se, nakon predavljanja teorijskog okvira u kontekstu turizma zasnovanog na kulturnom nasleđu, primenom PLS-SEM metode analizira uticaj komercijalizacije i autentičnosti turizma na lojalnost i zadovoljstvo turista u Vrnjačkoj Banji. Rezultati ove studije omogućavaju prepoznavanje potencijala za nove segmente turizma i nove turističke ponude. Originalnost rada pripada razvoju novonastalih oblika turizma. U radu će se prikazati kako se, na jedan inovativan način, mogu zadovoljiti potrebe turista pomoću napuštenih ruševina starih vila i kako se mogu stvoriti novi turistički proizvodi.

Ključne reči:

kulturni turizam,
kulturno nasleđe,
stare vile,
turistička valorizacija,
autentičnost.