



Historic Hotels and Sustainable Development: Promotion and Information Challenges from Students' Perspectives – A Kraków Case Study

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to assess the role of historic hotels in sustainable development, with particular attention to promotion and information challenges. The study, conducted in Kraków, comprised an analysis of source materials, a diagnostic survey among students, site visits to selected properties and interviews with industry representatives. The findings indicate low recognizability of hotels housed in heritage buildings and weak associations between their operations and the idea of sustainable development. Respondents were divided as to the extent of these establishments' contribution to sustainability. However, the protection of cultural heritage was consistently underscored as a key component. To fully realize their potential, historic hotels should combine authenticity with modern solutions and develop coherent information and promotion strategies.

Introduction

Historic hotels are lodging establishments situated in buildings of significant historical or cultural importance, such as historic residences, castles, or palaces (Dhewi et al. 2024). These hotels play a crucial role in the hospitality sector, preserving cultural heritage and providing guests with authentic and unique experiences (Marghany et al. 2023). Despite growing interest, the issue of historic hotels and similar establishments has not been thoroughly explored in the literature to date (Lee, Chhabra 2015; Marghany et al. 2023). The topic addressed in this article combines the issues of historic hotels with sustainable development. Such an approach has not yet received extensive analysis. Although, as Zdzisława Elżbieta Niemczewska (2020) notes, research on the impact of immovable cultural heritage on local sustainable development has been undertaken since the 1990s, most of these studies focus on the socio-economic effects of utilizing immovable cultural heritage. The renovation of buildings involves recycling many original materials and reusing structural elements, which results in reducing the amount of waste disposed of in landfills and the necessity to utilize more natural resources (Lee, Chhabra 2015). Such buildings, transformed into hotels, as elements of cultural heritage, constitute a common good and a valuable resource for local communities and can potentially contribute to local, sustainable socio-cultural development (Niemczewska 2020). The conservation of historic buildings and their repurposing should help maintain and restore their intrinsic heritage and cultural values to the communities in which they are located. Old structures can also support a sense of place and local identity. Building heritage can become a valuable and sustainable resource if transformed for tourism purposes (Lee, Chhabra 2015).

Heritage hotels are seen as a way to promote sustainable tourism, support the local economy, and provide guests with unique and memorable travel experiences (Thirumaran et al. 2023). However, the transformation of local material and intangible cultures, including buildings, into consumer goods has been criticized, especially when it diminishes authenticity (Chang 1997). Cultural sustainability can be studied in various contexts, from both multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives (Lee, Chhabra 2015). This article focuses on analyzing historic hotels from the perspective of sustainable development and the opinions of respondents in this regard.

First, the methodology is presented. Then, the results of the content analysis are presented and discussed. The paper ends with theoretical and managerial implications and suggestions for future research.

Methods

Data collection

The aim of this article is to assess the role of historic hotels in sustainable development, with particular attention to promotion and information challenges. In order to achieve this aim, the following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent are respondents aware of the existence of historic hotels, and how well do they know such establishments in Kraków?
2. Do respondents perceive the establishment of historic hotels as consistent with the idea of sustainable development, and what reasons do they provide for their views?
3. What characteristics of historic hotels are considered the most important by respondents?
4. What challenges related to the promotion of and dissemination of information about historic hotels can be identified on the basis of the respondents' answers?

The research procedure was primarily based on an analysis and critique of the literature, as well as document research and the authors' own observations. Initially, using source materials, including academic articles, reports and statistical data, the city of Kraków, in which historic hotels can be found, was described. Survey research was conducted in the first quarter of 2024 among students. The survey questionnaire consisted of 21 questions, and 324 individuals participated in the study. In this article, the authors focused on analyzing questions concerning the role of these establishments in sustainable development from the perspective of the respondents.

In Poland, a hotel is defined as: "a facility with at least 10 rooms, including most places in single and double rooms, providing a wide range of services related to the stay of customers" (Ustawa z dnia 29 sierpnia 1997 r. o usługach hotelarskich... 2023, art. 36, pkt 1)¹. Each hotel must provide breakfast and hotels with three stars and above should have a restaurant. Depending on the facility equipment and the scope of services provided, five categories of hotels are distinguished: the highest – 5 stars, the lowest – 1 star. However in a 3-star hotel, no restaurant is allowed if there is a restaurant within 500 m from the hotel (Rozporządzenie Ministra Gospodarki i Pracy z dnia 19 sierpnia 2004 r. w sprawie obiektów hotelarskich... 2017).

In the case of hotels located in historic buildings, data from the Central Register of Hotel Facilities (Rejestr Centralny Wykaz Obiektów Hotelarskich, CWOH Register) was used. It should be noted, however, that this register (concerning

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Polish are by I.K.

the relevant area of Kraków) is maintained on the basis of data collected by the Marshal's Office of the Małopolska Voivodeship, to which business owners operating in historic buildings listed in the heritage register submit information about exemptions from the requirement to meet the relevant categorization criteria due to the buildings' historic nature. In other words, the register includes only those hotels for which it was necessary to justify such exemptions.

Issues regarding the subject, scope, and form of heritage protection are primarily regulated in Polish law by the Act on the Protection and Care of Monuments. This document states that a monument is considered "an immovable or movable item, its parts or ensembles, created by humans or related to human activity and constituting evidence of a past epoch or event, whose preservation is in the social interest due to its historical, artistic, or scientific value" (Ustawa z dnia 23 lipca 2003 r. o ochronie zabytków... 2024, art. 3, pkt 1).

Place

Kraków is located in southern Poland, in the Małopolskie Voivodeship, and serves as the capital of the region. The area in question is home to over 800,000 people (Table 1).

Table 1. Basic data about Kraków as of 2023

Data	Specifications
Population	806 201
Internal migration balance	2327
Unemployment rate	1.9%

Source: study based on: (GUS–Local Data Bank 2024).

In addition to its administrative function, Kraków serves a range of other roles, including that of a tourist hub. It is one of the largest tourist centres in the country and the largest in the Małopolskie Voivodeship. This interest is due to its cultural heritage and well-developed tourist infrastructure. Poland boasts 17 sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list, with the historic centre of Kraków included in 1978 among the first 12 sites worldwide. An analysis of the register of monuments mentioned above revealed that, as of July 2023, Kraków has 1,255 entries. High-ranking tourist attractions are complemented by a well-developed tourist infrastructure. According to GUS data, 32.1% of accommodation places in the Małopolskie Voivodeship are located in Kraków, and 46.4% of tourists visiting the voivodeship stayed overnight in Kraków, with international tourists accounting for 73.2% of this number (Król, Pietrzak 2024: 7). Foreign guests mainly come from the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Germany and the USA (Table 2).

Table 2. Basic data on tourism in the city in 2023

Data	Specifications
Number of tourist accommodation establishments	253*
Number of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments	32,100*
Number of hotels	161*
Number of bed places in hotels	25,100*
Number of hotel rooms	12,100*
Number of people who stayed in tourist accommodation	2,647,500
Share of foreigners among tourists using accommodation	46.7%
Main countries from which foreign tourists came to Kraków	United Kingdom – 249,400 (20.2%) Ukraine – 134,700 (10.9%) Germany – 102,200 (8.3%) United States – 90,500 (7.3%) Italy – 57,500 (4.7%)

*Status as of July 31, 2023

Source: (Król, Pietrzak 2024: 34–35).

The number of hotels in Kraków is increasing. According to the CWOH register data, there were 169 hotels in Kraków (as May 2024). Most of these are 3-star establishments, with 1-star hotels being the least common. Data from the CWOH register indicate that in May 2024, the city had 28 hotels located in buildings listed in the heritage register, including 10 five-star, 13 four-star, and five three-star hotels (Ministerstwo Sportu i Turystyki n.d.). However, as previously noted, this data includes only those hotels for which it was necessary to justify exemptions from categorization requirements due to their historic character.

Data Analysis

Based on the respondents' answers, a tabular summary was prepared. The first table (Table 3) includes the number of yes/no responses. The second table (Table 4) pertains to a question for which respondents could indicate any number of answers.

Table 3. Summary of responses to survey questions

Question	Yes	No	No answer
Have you ever heard of historic hotels?	167	156	1
Do you know any historic hotels in Kraków?	54	269	1
Do you think that the creation of historic hotels fits in with the idea of sustainable development?	151	169	4

Source: Author's own elaboration based on surveys.

Table 4. Characteristics of historic hotels in the opinion of respondents

Characteristic	Number of indications
High standard	102
Should be located in historic buildings	187
Should relate to history and heritage in their interior design	171
Should be related to a legend	126
Should relate to the specificity of the region in which they are located	124
Should relate to the local cuisine and gastronomy	93
Should use environmentally friendly solutions	29
Should engage in pro-social activities	20
Other distinctive features	3

Source: Author's own elaboration based on surveys.

Results

More than half of the respondents answered that they had heard of historic hotels, but few were able to name them. The vast majority of people did not know of any historic hotels in Kraków. Of those who answered this question in the affirmative, rarely could anyone correctly identify any historic hotel in Kraków. The distribution of answers to the question as to whether the establishment of historic hotels is part of sustainable development was almost equal with a slight majority answering “no” (Table 3). A few respondents justified their answer. Those who linked the presence of hotels to sustainable development mainly pointed to the lack of need to construct new buildings (“converting old buildings is better than constructing new ones”, “old buildings will be better cared for this way”). There were also answers referring to economic functions (profit, “you can make money from it”), combining economics with education (“they lead to socio-economic development because you learn and earn”, “it’s something practical and at the same time can educate”). Some respondents highlighted education, history and heritage in particular in their justification (“it educates and presents history to the hotel’s customers”, “they can teach the public about the history of a region”, “they shape us, provide relevant knowledge about our history”, “you can learn about the old days”). One person highlighted environmental issues in the hotel industry through the use of vintage furniture in hotels.

In one of the questions respondents were also asked to indicate the characteristics of historic hotels (they could indicate more than one answer). The most frequent answer was that these facilities should be located in historic buildings and refer to history and national heritage in their interior design. Relatively few people chose the answer that historic hotels should carry out pro-ecological and pro-social activities (Table 4).

Discussion

This research shows that while respondents are aware of the existence of historic hotels, their knowledge of such hotels in Kraków is limited. As noted in previous studies, there is a marketing and management deficit in the distribution of heritage and cultural tourism products (Middleton 1997; Pearce, Tan 2004). Therefore, the management of such hotels should incorporate historical education, educating tourists and the local community through books, social media and marketing communications about the hotel's history to create a stronger and more meaningful position as a luxury heritage hotel embedded in a broader environment (Thirumaran et al. 2023; Zins, Adamu 2024).

Historic properties converted into heritage hotels possess distinctive features that set them apart from other hospitality services (Marghany et al. 2023). This can be the basis for building a promotional strategy for both the hotels and the city, attracting tourists interested in its cultural heritage. Among the main characteristics of these establishments, respondents indicated that they should be located in historic buildings and reference history and cultural heritage in their interior design. Historic hotels have a rich history (Henderson et al. 2013; Jones et al. 2013), and guests appreciate their unique architectural style and interior design (Henderson 2013; Xie, Shi 2020; Baniya, Thapa 2024).

Titis Shinta Dhewi and others (2024) point to the basic attributes of heritage hotels, which include location, historical charm, experience, authenticity, atmosphere and culture. These types of establishments are often of a high standard, which translates into relatively high prices for the services offered (Niemczewska 2020). Some respondents in the study also noted this high standard, although they did not consider it a defining feature. Respondents also recognized the role of the local cuisine offered in these hotels. These elements are linked to the concept of authenticity in historic hotels, which comprises several factors, including traditional design elements, local cuisine and cultural experiences (Dhewi et al. 2024; Timothy, Ron 2013).

Relatively few respondents indicated the need for historic hotels to undertake pro-ecological and pro-social activities. However, such activities are aligned with the principles of sustainable development for several reasons. Some of these reasons are discussed in studies conducted in Sri Lanka. The most commonly implemented sustainable practices in heritage hotels in Sri Lanka include sustainable design and construction, sustainable waste management, sustainable materials and sustainable hotel operations. Infrastructure, education, tours, and local activities were highlighted as the most frequently used methods by heritage hotels to protect the natural and cultural heritage of the properties (Sooriyaarachchi 2024).

These practices ensure that heritage hotels in Sri Lanka operate with minimal negative consequences for the nature and culture of heritage sites, while the positive effects include poverty reduction, women's empowerment and greater

understanding of the importance of cultural heritage (Sooriyaarachchi 2024). Additionally, some studies indicate that employees take pride in working in these heritage hotels due to their local cultural and historical significance and the respect they command within local communities (Marghany et al. 2023). As Niemczewska (2020) notes, historic properties converted into hotels can significantly contribute to local sustainable development in a socio-cultural dimension. However, it is necessary to impose on potential owners of such buildings the requirement to undertake initiatives that allow local communities to benefit from their cultural heritage. This ensures that their cultural values can be appreciated not only by paying guests but also by members of the local community (Niemczewska 2020; Murzyn-Kupisz 2012). Heritage properties whose owners and local authorities are involved in organizing such events have a stronger socio-cultural impact on the local community (Niemczewska 2020).

Conclusions

Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, plays a significant role in the development of Kraków's contemporary functions. The cultural values are one of the main reasons why tourists visit the city and give it a unique character. Kraków also has a well-developed accommodation base by national standards, with a notable feature being that some hotels are located in historic buildings. However, as the research showed, few people were able to identify these hotels. Therefore, broader promotional activities in this area are recommended.

The establishments described in this article are characterized by their location in historic buildings and, according to respondents, their interior design should reflect history and cultural heritage. Through their operations, they align with the idea of sustainable development. Nonetheless, this aspect concerning the facilities present in the city requires greater emphasis and visibility.

Theoretical implications

The results of this study contribute to the literature on hospitality and tourism by identifying the key attributes of historic hotels and their connections to sustainable development.

Institutional and managerial implications

This study also provides valuable information for individuals involved in the management and promotion of historic hotels. Firstly, the results highlight the necessity for broader marketing campaigns. Secondly, the attributes of historic hotels identified in the article enable those features that contribute to a competitive advantage to be emphasized.

Limitations and future directions

Although this study, like any other, deepens understanding of historic hotels, it has certain limitations. The research was conducted in Poland, and it is already evident that these establishments are not particularly well-known among the respondents. Similar studies should also be conducted with international visitors to gain a more comprehensive perspective.

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Ethics Approval Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

The requirement for informed consent was waived because the study was conducted using an anonymous survey, and no personally identifiable data were collected. Participation was voluntary.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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No artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.