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## Materiality of a themed route as a benchmark for contemporary tourist products and a chance for creation of a competitive offer

**Key words:** themed route, tourist product, offer

### **Abstract**

The article examines the organization of cultural routes as tourist operating systems. In the context of contemporary standards of cultural tourism, the author presents in detail the four criteria of ‘materiality’ of a cultural themed route, which determine the form of a mature tourism product. He describes and justifies the benefits of satisfying these criteria for the benefit of cultural tourists as consumers, the routes themselves, their partners and service providers, local governments and communities, in fact, the whole national tourist offer.

### **Introduction**

Themed routes constitute an important part of contemporary cultural tourism in Europe. They have been successful as systems of presentation of cultural heritage and as commercial tourist products, which to a growing degree depends on their organisational standards. Those standards must correspond with European tourist standards created by dynamic and mutual relations between the changing expectations of consumers and products of service providers. Research into the concept of ‘materiality’ of touristic cultural routes was introduced by the author in 2008. Since then, it has been consistently presented and developed, and accepted by wide circles of Polish researchers as a reference point for assessment of the category of products. This research has also been applied to the redevelopment of certain Polish cultural routes. It is modelled on previous publications by European and Polish experts on the matter, and takes their postulates into account. These are duly supplemented and adjusted to the reality of Polish tourism. The article aims to provide a broader presentation and justification of benefits stemming from practical application of the four basic criteria for route materiality which form the core of the concept. The justification will refer to the quality of the route as an organisational element in tourism and as a specific tourist product. Another reference point shall be the needs of two crucial recipients: service providers in the field of cultural tourism and individual tourists.

### **1. Where does the route materiality come from, and what does it denote?**

#### **1.1. Demand as the basis**

Several dominating trends which to a great extent determine tourist demand may be observed in preference surveys conducted among contemporary tourists and in consequent forecasts for the development of tourism. The same preferences may be found among cultural tourists, though strengthened additionally due to the sociological profile of the group. One of the most important predilections is individualisation of travels: currently, the number of tourists who travel alone or in small, private groups is growing (in fact, they already constitute the majority over organised trips). The trend is constantly strengthened by low budget airlines and so-called city breaks, or short trips to attractive cities, which are now immensely popular. Another significant determinant of the change is the fact that the range of interests of cultural tourists is widening. From the so-called high culture, the interest is shifting towards places and events related to everyday culture: namely, practically all aspects

of human activity, in particular construction, craftsmanship, industry, pop music, ethnical heritage (including folk traditions), beliefs and religions. More and more often, non-urbanised areas, smaller towns with unique qualities or simply well-constructed thematic 'stories' are becoming travel destinations. What is also noticeable: the attitude towards the heritage and its authenticity has recently changed. Currently, there is acceptance for more than the 'cold', purely objective authenticity confirmed by experts, which more often than not is questioned by results of new historical research and cultural studies. The 'hot' authenticity is based on the tourist's conviction that their expectations have been met and their contact with the heritage is in their opinion 'real'. Even that type of authenticity needs foundations in forms of attractive narration of events or description of places - based on facts or at least historically attested myths and legends. All that creates a demand for verified thematisation of space. Places may be thematised with use of methods typical for 'hard' historical research (e.g. grouping and critical analysis of sources, cross-cutting archaeological studies) or for 'soft' methods applied in anthropology and humanist cultural studies. Another attitude which may be more and more often noted among tourists is dislike for the so-called dominant narration. As a consequence, tourists expect alternative interpretations of the heritage, for instance from the viewpoint of ordinary participants in history, or of previously neglected groups (women, subordinates, ethnic or religious minorities). Such narration (also if based on fictitious events) requires intensive confrontation with the facts from the past if its objective is to give a deeper dimension to the tourist's meeting with a given place and its heritage. What also increases is the level of trust and utilisation of direct packages available online - and thus presented and consumed without traditional intermediaries, tour operators and travel agencies.<sup>1234</sup>

In conclusion: the growing group of individual cultural tourists is becoming increasingly mobile and interested in a wider range of attractions from all over the world. They are in search for holidays with maximum freedom but also with guaranteed basic benefits such as transfer to a selected place and local services (accommodation, meals). These must be paired with a certainty of enjoyable time, access to preferred attractions and consistent thematic range of products. As before, they expect real and physical encounter with live culture or heritage - or at least with what they deem to be such heritage. Therefore, they are accustomed to relatively high customer service standard (accommodation, meals, tickets, interesting interpretation of the heritage), but also expect flexibility of the whole product. Contemporary cultural tourists do not want to be led by hand or instructed. However, they also do not want long searching for attractions, losing one's way or time on organising the trip themselves. Most of all, they do not like being disappointed with what they see (or even worse: what they do not see due to limited availability).

## 1.2. Supply as the answer

If people responsible for creation of tourist products acquaint themselves with research on profiles, behaviour and preferences of tourists, and are conscious of changes in demand, then a qualitative change may be noticed as regards new products and modifications of already existing ones. It is most obvious in the context of city and thematic tourism: an attractive, potentially successful range of products must be highly individualised (e.g. offered as individual packages), guaranteed to be delivered (appropriate description, availability), and flexible. As such, it should consist of packages, for instance 'city breaks',

<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. Alejski, *Turystyka w obliczu wyzwań XXI wieku*, Albis, Kraków 1999

<sup>2</sup> Cf. among others B. McKercher, H. Du Cros, *Cultural tourism: the partnership between tourism and cultural heritage management*, Binghamton, New York 2002; G. Richards (ed.), *Cultural Tourism. Global and Local Perspectives*, New York 2007

<sup>3</sup> M. Prylińska, P. Ratkowska, *City break - próba wyjaśnienia i zdefiniowania zjawiska w odniesieniu do polskiego rynku usług turystycznych*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa', iss. 10, 2010, p. 4-16

<sup>4</sup> Cf. T. Selwyn, *The Tourist Image. Myths and Myths Making in Tourism*, Chichester 1996, p. 25-30; see also: A. Wiczorkiewicz, *Apetyt turysty*, Kraków 2008, p. 41-56

city tours, and extensive hotel offer enriched by external services which make tourists more active and encourage them to stay in a given place longer.<sup>5</sup>

This applies also to cultural routes. It has long been noted that they should turn more professional and commercial, and a comprehensive organisational scheme should be created for their management. For several years, both conclusions and lists of demands have been formulated by researchers on the basis of their studies, and then presented in scientific literature on the subject<sup>6</sup>. In the context of the situation and the needs of Polish cultural routes, as well as in the light of own study of several Polish systems, the author has compiled the most important conclusions. Additionally, a set of criteria has been created which decide what the actual standard of the route is. Supplementary requirements which increase the appeal and competitiveness of a given system have also been developed. The set of four criteria which determine the maturity of a tourist product - such as a route - have been called by the author **the criteria for materiality of the route**. His intention is to devise clear message directed at representatives of the industry and recipients of the offer. Linear systems of thematic tourist penetration (namely, routes) may be called material once their structure and composition is verified. Once it is done, a concrete system will be bound to really function in the sphere of tourism. This would be contrary to virtual products which are often limited to 'ideas for sightseeing' with no guaranteed access to places, objects, up-to-date tourist information, or systems actually existing but abandoned and forgotten by their organisers. The notion of materiality has functioned in specialist literature since 2008, and in the meantime has seeped into common use in scientific reflection on tourism, as well as into Polish didactics.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.3. Four criteria of materiality

The criteria were justified and shortly described already in the first Polish monograph on cultural tourism and the preliminary presentation of the concept of material routes.<sup>8</sup> Selected Polish cultural routes were valorised and presented with help of these criteria<sup>9</sup>. Another monograph by the author was devoted solely to thematic routes which were analysed in a detailed manner. In there, the criteria were made more specific and applied in the assessment of tourist potential of several routes as tourist organisational systems. They were supplemented with a number of proposals from other researchers in the field, since they described desired features of the systems, increased the appeal and competitiveness of the routes<sup>10</sup>. Particular criteria for materiality (thematization of the route, availability of attractions and coordination) became subject to further justification and research on a number of Polish and foreign cultural routes. Results of these studies were published in

<sup>5</sup> Cf. O. Artyshuk, *Indywidualne pakiety turystyczne w turystyce kulturowej*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa', iss. 9, 2010, p. 4-24

<sup>6</sup> The largest collections of conclusions regarding organisation of cultural routes, backed by research on such systems (and, in some cases, the whole list of demands and proposals) have appeared in the following foreign publications: L. Puczko, T. Ratz, 2007, *Trailing Goethe, Humbert, and Ulysses; Cultural Routes in Tourism*, [w:] G. Richards (red.), *Cultural tourism, Global and Local perspectives*, New York, p. 131-148 and Steinecke A., *Kulturtourismus. Marktstrukturen, Fallstudien, Perspektiven*, Muenchen-Wien, 2007, and Polish publications: A. Stasiak, *Produkt turystyczny – szlak*, 'Turystyka i Hotelarstwo', iss. 10, 2006, p. 9-40; A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Turystyka Kulturowa. Fenomen, potencjał, perspektywy*, Gniezno 2008; A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Regionalne szlaki tematyczne. Idea, potencjał, organizacja*, Kraków 2010; Gaweł Ł., *Szlaki dziedzictwa kulturowego. Teoria i praktyka zarządzania*, Kraków, 2011

<sup>7</sup> For more on the topic of a route as a tourist product, cf. J. Kaczmarek, A. Stasiak, B. Włodarczyk, *Produkt turystyczny. Pomysł, organizacja, zarządzanie*, Warszawa 2010

<sup>8</sup> A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Turystyka Kulturowa. Fenomen... op. cit.*, p. 294nn

<sup>9</sup> A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt A., *Kulturowe szlaki turystyczne – próba klasyfikacji oraz postulaty w zakresie ich tworzenia i funkcjonowania*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa' iss. 2, 2008, p. 17-32; A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Polskie szlaki turystyczno-kulturowe: kryteria i zasady waloryzacji potencjału*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa', iss. 4, 2009, p. 4-28

<sup>10</sup> A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Regionalne szlaki tematyczne. Idea... op.cit.*, p. 51-68

other works of the author<sup>11</sup>. In the meantime, the proposed assessment of route organisation was the basis for numerous works of other Polish scientists<sup>12</sup>. Comprehensive restructuring of route structure and range took place as well, including the biggest alteration on one of the most significant systems, the Piast Trail<sup>13</sup>. The reader is therefore directed to abovementioned works where they may find detailed definitions and applications of the criteria; this paper will present a short description of route materiality criteria and their most important requirements applying to particular systems. They are listed in Table (1) below.

Table 1. Criteria for route materiality

Criterion of justified thematisation	scientific	scientific publications confirming the cultural authenticity of the aspect of heritage in question, the route itself or its key attractions
	awareness-raising	availability of up-to-date literature popularizing the route and (at least) its key attractions: guides, information brochures, films, presentations, ea.
Criterion of signage	route path	signage by public roads: the routing and exits towards attractions. Signage on bicycle routes.
	route objects	route boards by its attractions, with descriptions of the attraction, route and coordinator, identifying the attraction as a part of the system
	systemic	presence of the route and its attractions as connected objects within satnav systems (GPS) and mobile apps available online
criterion of object availability	transport-wise	Whether the attractions may be reached by car, coach, other means of transport, and public transport. Distance from stations and stops. Parking space by the attractions.
	actual	Possibility to see the attraction at a given time without the need to schedule or other impediments.
criterion of route coordination	minimal	1. monitoring of the condition of the system, including route and attraction signage together with their state and availability, 2. collection, production, processing, updating and distribution of information concerning the route, attractions and events, 3. organising / co-organising promotions.
	optimal	4. initiating and distribution of simple services (sightseeing, workshops, shows, etc.), personnel training sessions, 5. organising complex services (packages, events, trips) for the whole route, its sections or important points, distribution of the services, 6. ordering, promotion, distribution of events, services and products among external companies together with ensuring their execution and high quality. 7. conducting or ordering analyses of route tourist traffic, and tourist opinions and preferences.

Source: author on the basis of: Mikos v. Rohrscheidt 2012, p. 54-61.

<sup>11</sup> A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Od ekstremalnej specjalizacji do 'silva rerum' - problemy koncepcyjnej i praktycznej tematyki polskich szlaków kulturowych*, 2010 [in:] M. Kazimierczak (ed.), *Współczesne podróże kulturowe*, Poznań, p. 65-88; A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Faktyczna dostępność turystyczna obiektów sakralnych jako problem turystyki religijnej w Polsce*, [in:] Z. Kroplewski, A. Panasiuk (eds.), *Turystyka Religijna. Zagadnienia interdyscyplinarne*, Szczecin 2011, (ZN 647), p. 35-57; A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt A., *Koordinacja turystycznych szlaków tematycznych – analiza wybranych systemów polskich i europejskich*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa' iss. 1, 2012., p. 35-61

<sup>12</sup> Materiality criteria have been applied in among others: Kruczek Z., *Szlak Oscypkowy w Małopolsce. Droga od pomysłu do produktu turystycznego* [in:] B. Włodarczyk, B. Krakowiak, J. Latosińska (eds.) *Kultura i turystyka, Wspólna droga*, Łódź 2011, p. 101-112, Fidyk K., *Szlaki turystyczno-kulturowe Małopolski - stała oferta czy efemeryczne zjawisko?* (op.cit., p. 87-99). The complete assessment according to this methodology has been conducted on about 10 Polish and foreign routes, with results presented in among others: Mikos v. Rohrscheidt A., *Waloryzacja potencjału turystyczno-kulturowego szlaku tematycznego Niemiecki Szlak Bajek - 'Deutsche Märchenstrasse'*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa', iss. 9, 2011, p. 52-77; Czajkowski Sz., Mikos v. Rohrscheidt A., *Wyniki analizy potencjału turystyczno-kulturowego pętli wielkopolsko - lubuskiej Szlaku Cysterskiego*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa', iss. 1, 2012, , p. 66-87; Buryan P., *Wyniki analizy potencjału turystyczno-kulturowego andaluzyjskiego Szlaku Kalifatu Kordoby*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa' iss. 2, 2012, p. 76-95; Cerkaski T., *Wyniki analizy potencjału turystyczno-kulturowego Wielkopolskiej Drogi Świętego Jakuba*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa' iss. 6 (2012), p. 59-78

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. Dubińska, *Kreowanie nowego produktu turystycznego na bazie szlaku tematycznego – Małopolska Ścieżka Winna*, 'Turystyka Kulturowa' iss. 8 (2013); A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Szlak Piastowski w przebudowie. Struktura, organizacja, zarządzanie*, Kraków 2013

The above description of the criteria is a summary of specifications prepared by the author and described in detail in surveys for route and attraction analysis forms utilised in potential analyses and audits of thematic routes. It illustrated not only the actual scope of four grading criteria, but provides insight into benefits stemming from implementation of those criteria to a specific system. Here, they are treated as one and (if fulfilled) referred to jointly as the material organisation of the route. The following two chapters present in a detailed manner the list of benefits available to tourists (chapter 2) and researchers of cultural routes, who, once the criteria are implemented and popularised, may assess and classify the routes as well as create new such systems (chapter 3).

## 2. Materiality of the route as an indication of modern standards for consumers

If a linear system of tourist penetration fulfils the materiality criteria, verified by means of an independent audit of the route (which takes the criteria into consideration) and publicly announced, then the given products acquires a solid 'brand' in the domestic tourist market. Consequently, regardless of the benefits for the better organised system itself, it may enjoy increased interest from potential customers. Two basic consumer groups are to be distinguished here.

On the one hand, there are **tour operators** (travel agencies, operators of online package tours - oriented towards a specific area or theme - and social entities active in the field of tourism). In case of verified material routes, they will have a guarantee of professional service. For instance, the obtained information would be up-to-date, availability of attractions for a given tourist group - guaranteed, and guiding services would be provided by professionals and not accidental people. The latter is particularly important in the light of so-called deregulation of the professions of tour guides and leaders, currently conducted in Poland. Moreover, tour operators will not have to create an attractive tour itinerary away from their offices, since they will be able to request one from route coordinators, as a rule. They will also be able to order a permanent and reliable partner (the coordinator of the route) to make a reservation on some or most of necessary services, or even purchase them in bundles and at a discount. They will also receive ready-made informational and promotional materials created for the route. Additionally, some promotional costs concerning trips to a given destination will disappear, since the coordinator of a material route personally sees to its regular presence in the media and market. Thus, first of all potential tourists will be easier to persuade as regards this specific choice of destination, and secondly there will be more people who are already acquainted with the route. They will search for organised tours along the route and find the tour operator in question. If the route is more thoroughly coordinated, tour operators may also purchase ready-made itineraries for their groups, which will be time- and work-saving as well as cost cutting. The route would be then treated as a finished product which they distribute via their usual channels, which is mutually beneficial. They may also organise tours within the route area in the period with particularly high number of events, since route coordinators may prepare local packages (including so-called special packages planned alongside thematic events). From their point of view, the information that criteria described in Table 1 have been fulfilled constitutes a reliable signal of a well-researched and prepared offer. Without additional costs of concept work, they may use the offer as a foundation for their itineraries (packages). Just as well, the product will serve as an invitation to cooperate with route coordinators on a permanent basis, them being their local partner and representative who performs services they had sold.

In turn, **individual tourists** prefer travelling on their own but search for a guarantee for specific services (accommodation, sightseeing of selected attractions, local guiding services, reservations for concrete events or other attractions, sometimes local transfers as well). For them, once the professionalism in route organisation is confirmed, it will be easier

to make use of its coordinator's services than to search for and laboriously 'glue together' various elements at various points of the route. An additional advantage would be for them the fact that usually package tours sold to a greater number of customers are priced lower than separate services included in the package. A route organised in such a way will be verified by its first users. Nowadays, in the times of online discussion boards and tourist web portals, opinions spread as fast as lightning. The route will therefore become an option which is competing with other potentially attractive holiday destinations. If its cultural authenticity is confirmed, and high quality service is guaranteed, these may become the decisive factors in its favour - even if the attractions within the programme are less popular than those located in other places or on other routes. From the tourist's point one can consider that the perception of the material status of a route is a promise of a certain kind: for your money, we offer you an authentic experience. The promise that the organiser will actually give you something instead of leaving the visitors with just a printed leaflet in their hands. This is in contrast with the so-called virtual routes and their virtual attractions, which are growing in numbers, but losing reliability. "Come here, do not go anywhere else. Trust in our signs (which mark physical areas and stand for quality and support at any time). We will guide you wherever something really interesting is; we will accept you and show you what you want to see, providing unforgettable experience" are all tag lines presented to the potential visitor. **Table 2** presents in more detail the most important 'guarantees' which the tourist has when the four materiality criteria are fulfilled for a thematic route.

Table 2. Results of implementation of route materiality criteria, from the consumer's point of view

Criterion	Promise
Thematisation - thematic unity of attractions	Authentic historical (art, etc.) heritage is certain to be there
Thematisation - local popular literature	We will give you knowledge, at the level you prefer and in the form that you find attractive
Route signage	We will lead you and guide you. You will be independent, but will not get lost or lose time
Attraction signage	With our help provided on a single sign, you will learn about interesting attractions nearby and plan your trip.
Transport accessibility	You can reach the attraction by public transport, sightsee and come back without stress. Or: you will park your car in a secure place.
Actual accessibility	You are certain to enter the attraction without former scheduling
Coordination – information	At any moment or place you have access to up-to-date information on the route, its attractions, exhibitions, availability, events
Coordination - revision of the offer	The offer will be up-to-date, we guarantee its quality
Coordination - services (wider range)	We will make reservations for you: accommodation, meals, sightseeing, participation in a party, etc.

Source: author on the basis of: A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Regionalne szlaki ... op. cit.*, p. 54-61, A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Koordinacja turystycznych*, 2012, *op. cit.*, Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Faktyczna dostępność... op. cit.*, A. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Od ekstremalnej specjalizacji... op. cit.*

The above list of benefits for individual tourists is not exhaustive. Most definitely, more could be added, such as not losing time on searching for information or the optimal transportation options, or cost reduction which occurs when purchasing bundles or services provided by route organiser. In fact, the abovementioned benefits will certainly occur when route materiality criteria are fulfilled to a minimal extent. The last element barely hints at other possible profits which accompany more activity on behalf of the route coordinator. It should be noted here that the manner in which other criteria are fulfilled may translate directly to other benefits for the tourists. For instance, alternative routes may be mapped for cyclists, and attractive materials may be prepared for specific groups of recipients

(e.g. children, tourists passionate about a particular subject, etc.) as a yet another way to fulfil the thematisation criterion. If the materials are prepared with the view to recipients' perceptive abilities or hobbies, they increase the appeal of the route. The criteria describe therefore only the bare minimum, and do not limit the creativity of route organisers, who may act so as to increase users' satisfaction and system's attractive value.

### 3. Materiality as a chance for Polish cultural routes

The potential benefits stemming from popularisation of route materiality, brought to the systems, entities involved and the whole thematic segment of domestic cultural tourism market may be divided into four basic groups, described in more detail below.

#### 3.1. Importance of materiality as a standard for the route itself

For **creators and organisers of new routes**, the materiality criteria could become a sort of a 'checklist' if treated as an integral part of the concept. Detailed versions of the criteria described in publications quoted above (which also include ready-made description forms for analyses of routes and objects) may become useful here. The standards for organisation of routes as products based on materiality criteria may be applied in both construction of new routes and in modernisation of existing ones. Such actions could bring tangible benefits for instance in reorganisation of Polish Cistercian Ways, and many other routes.<sup>14</sup>

**Route managers** (coordinators) may promote their products more easily once the standard for route organisation with four criteria spreads. Then, it would be enough to point to the fact that their route fulfils the materiality criteria and what directly follows, guarantees benefits enumerated in Table 2. For internal use, they will have at their disposal additional justification for requests for help directed at route partners, including attraction administrators and local government. They could demand for example full accessibility or proper signage on attractions or access roads.

Particular **route partners** (attractions, tourist and social organisations, other entities) and **service providers along the route** (guides, tour leaders, hospitality industry, others) will also benefit directly from implementation of the criteria. With active coordination of the route, they may work in a team and utilise the synergy stemming from mutual promotion of attractions and services, which could happen at particular points of the route, on websites run together, or via common promotional activities. With appropriate signage, demand for services rises since tourists begin to visit more attractions marked as consecutive destinations. The popularity of the route increases also alongside the effective signage on various access roads and alternative routes (e.g. bicycle paths). In fact, the latter might even bring a completely new group of consumers to the route. Moreover, well-fulfilled thematisation criterion together with effective (easy to understand, attractive) popularisation of scientific research results will connect separate products and services in the tourist/recipient's mind. This may lead to longer stays and utilisation of more services in more places. Thematisation, if conducted adequately, may also constitute inspiration for new, original or even unique local services. They could increase the system's appeal and generate more income for the same or new service providers.

#### 3.2. Importance of route materiality as a criterion for local governments and other managers of public funds

It is easy to apply materiality criteria to the assessment of the project, and **verify** the quality of **proposals when carried out at the initial stages of the route creation**. In this phase one can determine whether they are realistic concepts effective for tourism and tourists,

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, *Regionalne szlaki tematyczne*, op.cit. p. 135-141; p. 388-401

adjusted to contemporary standards, or rather only fictitious projects aimed at obtaining co-financing from regional development funds or other subsidies. Sometimes the only objective is to create comfortable work processes, due to the unrealistic assessment of local attractions by local governments or originators of the idea. With the proposed criteria, no funds would be wasted on ill-considered concepts which from the very beginning would have no chance of creation of a valid tourist product. Once such criteria are entered into the regulations on project assessment under the 'tourist routes' headline, a barrier would be created which would enforce high quality and consistent implementation of the projects. It would also be reliable justification for those proposals which do not meet requirements of a realistic tourist product. Consequently, there would be few or at least much fewer routes which are closed or abandoned soon after being created ('constructed'), once the funds run dry. New funds or their instalments could be granted for instance once the criteria are met in a specific time. Alternatively, the new system could be supervised and verified sometime after it is officially opened. In such a situation, there is the possibility that the route will pay for itself and will 'survive' the birth. Tourists who will 'discover' it will also bring profits.

In turn, if the statute of an existing route includes the materiality criteria, it will ensure that it has a solid foundation together with useful tools for supervising and monitoring its **activity/function**? Real-time management of such a complex product could be conducted in the light of meeting the requirements for its actual functioning.

### **3.3. Importance of route materiality as a standard in scientific research and didactics**

Route materiality criteria have in the meantime become significantly important for researchers who assess routes' organisational level and commercialisation. If they were to be universally accepted, assessment would become transparent at least in this particular sphere of the linear system of tourism organisation. When the same criteria, requirements and verification procedures are applied to all systems, everyone is aware of what has been assessed and how, and what the results are. A natural consequence would be to compare the assessment, which will allow for wider analyses of the product group on a regional and national scale, as well as for drawing more general conclusions and proposing recommendation for the whole industry.

With the utilisation of such research in didactics (during classes on cultural tourism, creation and marketing of tourist products), it will be easier to educate service providers active along the routes. Graduates would not only know the aims, attractions and locations of the routes, but would understand how important the standards are. Maintaining the standards concerning organisation and functioning of the routes will also mean cooperation for the common good within particular systems. In the short term, a group of people will become available on the job market with a good theoretical base together with the experience from cases studies conducted during classes and field trips. They would therefore be ready to undertake various functions as route coordinators or service providers. Some of them could even professionally create new products.

### **3.4. Route materiality as a chance for the domestic tourism and cultural attractions**

A group of cultural tourist routes appears in the market, with a clearly defined, verified and formal status of material routes which identifies them as well-developed tourist products. Regardless of benefits for the routes themselves, such an occurrence would bring a new element of positive competition to the domestic tourist market. First of all, for new routes to gain this status specific criteria would have to be fulfilled, which is in the best interests of tourists. It would enhance positive results of the systems' functioning (synergy), their impact on attractions (customer service levels), on local communities (new jobs within the sector) and on local governments (increased VAT and PIT taxes). Secondly, the more popular the status of the material routes become, the more competition would materialise among creators



of modern products, based on the one hand on authentic heritage, on the other - on tourist-friendliness. Gradually, the market of thematic tourism would improve in quality. Additionally, there would be visibly fewer fictitious products which are identified as unreliable by the tourists and consumers only when they are consumed, which is too late. If not eliminated, such products would at least be clearly separated from the rest. Reasonable funding from public and development funds granted only to concepts, which truly provide services, would allow for effective utilisation of Polish and European financial resources. The latter are most probably going to be available for limited time now, and are important for better and more long-lasting educational and economic benefits. Another, definitely also very significant, result of the introduction of the standard could be a change in Poles' tourist preferences. From passive relaxation, they would move towards active participation in culture via, among others sightseeing and using thematic routes. Consequently, their intellectual capital will grow together with the understanding of historical and cultural diversity visible in national heritage. Improving the domestic range of products could persuade, at least some tourists to spend their holidays in Poland. As a result, the economic export of the country could improve, and some routes could at least draw (or attract) foreign tourists as well, further increasing the export.

## Conclusion

A status of a material route means that a thematic system is durable, up-to-date and reliable. It is a good foundation for commercialisation. Materiality of a route assures its appeal among tour operators, and competitiveness in the organised tourism market. For an individual tourist, materiality could be a guarantee for an enjoyable holiday, owing to a 'ready-made idea', available attractions, necessary facilities and potentially also interesting events. The status materiality may be obtained once four criteria are fulfilled: full thematisation, full accessibility, consistent signage and possibly wide coordination. Redesigning of cultural routes and new routes created in Poland take the criteria of materiality into consideration is in the best interest of the systems (thematic routes): the domestic cultural tourism, route partners and service providers - as well as of tourists as consumers. If this is not implemented, routes will be bound to fail and any enthusiasm, energy or funds devoted to their creation and organisation will be lost. For precisely the same reason, applications for co-financing of creation, redesigning or functioning of cultural routes should be assessed on the basis of materiality criteria. Popularisation of the criteria so that they are widely used in valuations of route construction, in tourism didactics and in promotion of thematic systems ought to contribute to improvement in quality and subsequently competitive value of Polish tourism. As a result, tourist traffic on those routes would increase, simultaneously positively influencing employment, local residents' incomes and local governments. Tourists who are welcomed and provided with good service will leave satisfied and spread the good word, especially through social media; thus ensuring local employment.

Heritage, if managed appropriately, may cease to remain an expensive, misunderstood and increasingly unfamiliar relic of the past, and instead serve future generations.

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## Materialność tematycznych szlaków kulturowych jako punkt odniesienia dla współczesnych produktów turystycznych oraz szansa na stworzenie konkurencyjnej oferty

**Słowa kluczowe:** szlaki tematyczne, produkt turystyczny, turystyka kulturowa, oferta

### **Abstrakt**

Artykuł weryfikuje organizację tematycznych szlaków kulturowych jako przykładu systemu turystycznego. W kontekście współczesnych standardów turystyki kulturowej autor przedstawia szczegółowo cztery kryteria "materialności" tematycznych szlaków kulturowych, które determinują formę dojrzałego produktu turystycznego. Ponadto opisuje i uzasadnia zalety spełniania tych kryteriów z punktu widzenia korzyści: turystów kulturowych jako konsumentów, samych szlaków, ich partnerów i dostawców usług, samorządów i społeczności lokalnych oraz w sumie - całej krajowej oferty turystycznej.