Wellness comes in salty water: thalassotherapy spas and service level of satisfaction

ABSTRACT

The lucrative and rapid expansion of the wellness tourism sector in Europe and Asia has led to intense competition among wellness tourism destinations. This study investigates the business in five major nations: China, Japan, Russia, Germany, and Italy, which together accounts for 77% of global revenue pre-pandemic from the thalassotherapy spas and resort industry. We analysed TripAdvisor's 3116 tourists' review responses representing five-star thalassotherapy facilities. The primary drivers of an excellent service include hotel room facilities and thalasso-treatments with seawater. We identify a semantic clustering linked to thalassotherapy spa attractiveness and determine attributes that are pertinent to satisfaction of wellness-seeking tourists. The current study contributes to the sparse literature on wellness tourism specifically relating to thalassotherapy spas and the level of satisfaction associated with the service. The study suggests practical advice to address the negative effects of customer dissatisfaction on services that can overshadow the positive effects of satisfaction.
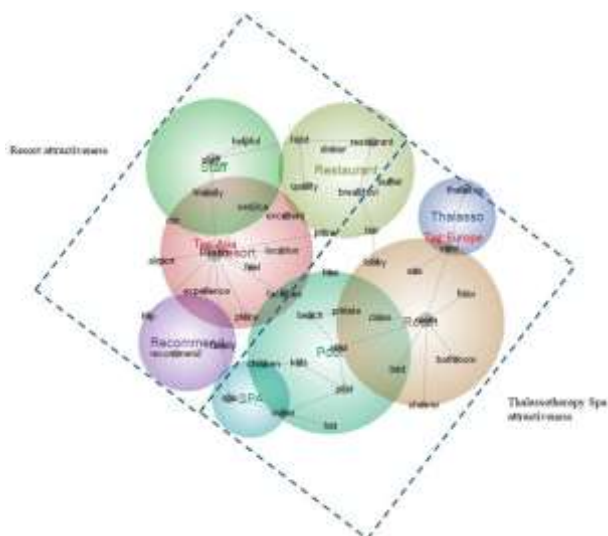
KEYWORDS
Wellness tourism; thalassotherapy spa; customer satisfaction

1. Introduction

Wellness tourism is a growing global niche market segment linked to two fundamental and interrelated trends: (1) increasing health-consciousness (2) dealing with stressful workplaces (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013). Wellness tourism makes a considerable contribution to national economic gains (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013). The Global Wellness Economy Monitor (Global Wellness Institute, 2017) points out that many Spas have grown their revenues mainly due to an rise in demand for tourism seeking wellness and increased spending on things related to wellbeing and wellness.

The wellness trend is reflected in selective tourism, notably in thalassotherapy tourism (Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2013). Thalassotherapy, which uses seawater in health and wellness, is a prominent growing feature of wellness tourism, yet research is still scarce on its customer perceptions, trends, and satisfaction. Past studies have found that service quality has a significant influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty mainly for hedonic products (e.g. hospitality, food and beverages experiences, vacation, and other tourism products and services), (Han et al., 2018; Parasuraman and Zeithaml, 1988; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Based on such findings, thalassotherapy spas are paying close attention to upgrade their services and meet customer needs and desires to develop appropriate strategies (Lin & Liang, 2011; Standing et al., 2014).

The scarcity of literature linked to this segment leaves a gap regarding the perceptions of quality and experience from the tourist's point of view (Lai & Hitchcock, 2016). Authors Sánchez et al. (2017) track scientific publication in thermalism, thalassotherapy, and spas and indicate a modest growth of publications in the past 15 years, but most studies address health resorts, very few address thalassotherapy.

The current study targets consumers' experiences in thalassotherapy spas and resorts, in particular the main attributes relating to themes and concepts that could lead to improve customer satisfaction in the wellness tourism industry in Asia and Europe. The study classifies these attributes according to their influence on tourists' reported satisfaction rates (Cadotte & Tugeon, 1988). It also expands the previous studies in tourism and hospitality by clarifying the influence of user-generated content (UGC) in reviews of tourists who are satisfied and unsatisfied (Lin & Liang, 2011; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Vargo et al., 2007). The main objectives are to:

1. extract from the semantic clustering and classify the dominant themes in Asia and Europe that identify the attractiveness of thalassotherapy spas;
2. identify the multiple aspects and factors related to tourists' satisfaction and dissatisfaction in using thalassotherapy spas.

This study addresses the lessons that the tourism and wellness industries can learn from each other through understanding wellness practices to deliver better quality tourism. The tourism business can enrich wellness that is based on thalassotherapy and spa treatments in multiple areas that include the supply of resort accommodation, hotel selection factors, dining heritage, and recreational seawater and pool activities for families based.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1. A sea of opportunities for the wellness industry

Literature reveals that "wellness" entered the standard dictionary during the 1970s, and from then on this term has grown in popularity, especially during the last 15 years (GWI, 2013, p. ii). Wellness is a multidimensional concept founded on the belief that inner balance and spirituality combine with and underpin the physical, mental, and social well-being of individuals and the environment (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). The concept of wellness was first coined by Dunn (1959) as a special state of health that implies a holistic sense of wellbeing that includes the body, soul, and environment.

Most researchers have defined wellness tourism as an attempt by tourism destinations to attract tourists by deliberately promoting wellness and health services. These may include medical examinations by qualified medical staff at resorts or hotels, special diets, acupuncture treatments, vitamins, and herbal medicine (Goodrich & Goodrich, 1987). Hall (1992) analysed health tourism within the context of adventure and sports tourism, including "fun" activities, while Mueller and Kaufman (2001) classify the wellness tourism cluster as a subgroup of health tourism. The GWI (2013, p. vi) finds that the Global Wellness Tourism Economy report defines "wellness tourism as a travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's wellbeing." The products and treatments of the health and wellness tourism sector claim to be an alternative to more conventional tourism products in the market, advocating wellbeing, relaxing experiences, beauty, and habits that promote healthy lifestyles (Meyer, 2014). Puczkó and Bachvarov (2006) high-light that the major services identified in the wellness subsector include: thalassotherapy – natural seawater treatments, spas – therapies-therapeutic use of mineral water and other resources, spa resorts – treatments based on drinking water and using pools and spas, and climatic therapies – unique treatments using local climatic conditions.

In 2015 the World Health Organization officially recognised the positive effects of hydrological medicine in terms of preventing multiple chronic diseases and other health-related disorders (Maraver & Karagulle, 2012). Wellness is a growing segment of the health tourism cluster and it represents an opportunity in emerging countries, but cultural and language differences need to be understood to address new leisure opportunities (UNWTO/ETC, 2018). Wellness plays an important role by contributing to tourists' wellbeing (Schofield, 2004). This takes wellness tourism from being a passive form of tourism with a focus on escaping to being a subsector in which tourists are driven by the desire to seek enhanced wellness actively (Schofield, 2004; Smith & Kelly, 2006).

The thalassotherapy business also helps to promote sea-derived products/activities such as salt-water algae treatments. Various species of algae are used in skincare treatments, and the Food and Agriculture Organization states that from 2005 to 2015 the

total production of algae doubled to 30.4 million tons, and that the top importers are China, the European Union, and Japan (FAO, 2018).

Wellness tourism is one of the fastest-growing subsectors of tourism worldwide, with significant commercial impacts based on the increasing number of tourists interested in the healthy aspects of tourism (Clarke, 2010), with more and more tourists enjoying holiday periods that bring health benefits (Mrčela et al., 2015). These concepts of wellness involve people who travel to a different place to proactively pursue activities that maintain or enhance their health and wellbeing. Wellness customers are willing to travel to preserve their health through activities provided by tourism firms, destination countries, and healthcare organisations (Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2013).

The World Tourism Organization (2017) has identified a set of activities that offer the prospect of healing and wellbeing through natural resources, which affect tourists' movements and stays in accommodation units. Tourists that seek wellness are usually wealthier and spend significantly more while on vacation compared to other tourists (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013). International wellness tourists spend 59% more than the average tourist, and domestic wellness tourists tend to spend 159% more (Yeung & Johnston, 2014) suggesting the economic significance of the segment. This provides the impetus to investigate and improve understanding. Determining best practices to enhance business performance is both opportune and important in the wellness-related services. The consumer searches typically associated with wellness look specifically for lodging facilities that range from spa destinations to traditional hotels and resorts. Consumer spending is on varied products and services such as wellness tourism products, food and beverages, shopping, travelling, sightseeing, going on family vacations, and joining recreational activities, etc. (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013). All of these expenditures are considered part of the wellness tourism economy as long as they involve travellers whose primary or secondary trip purpose is to pursue wellness (Global Wellness Institute, 2017). As health consciousness grows, consumers have begun to place a premium on wellness experiences associated with good results (Marković et al., 2014). In response, resorts have invested in facilities such as spas, traditional healing practices, and other water treatments (Tobergte & Curtis, 2013). Entrepreneurship and business innovations across continents are expected to keep the wellness segment of tourism growing to meet the rising consumer demand (Global Wellness Institute, 2017).

2.2. Customer satisfaction

According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 1), a "person's attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity" with some degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Thus, verbal measures can be used to represent aspects of individuals' attitudes (Breckler & Wiggins, 1989). However, the literature includes few studies of how various components of wellness tourists' experiences motivate consumers' choices to travel to a specific destination (Ali et al., 2016).

In the tourism industry, online reviews are a common way for customers to express feelings and rate their experiences, which range from excellent to terrible (Schuckert et al., 2015). Tourists express varying intensity when describing their feelings of satisfaction (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Their posts use attitudinal terms such as "euphoric," "very satisfied," "pleasantly surprised," "saved," and "helpless" (Giese & Cote, 2009, p. 272).

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) state that satisfaction is a customer's evaluation of a service, in the sense that the service met the customer's expectations. Past studies on customer satisfaction indicate that expectations have a direct effect on subsequent satisfaction and perceived performance.

The two-factor theory, also known as the motivation-hygiene theory, regards the concept that dissatisfaction is not the opposite of satisfaction (Herzeberg et al., 1959). This theory posits that individuals have two different types of needs. The first is the hygiene factor, Herzeberg et al. (1959) refer to the factors that cause discontent when unmet. However, satisfying these needs merely prevents dissatisfaction but does not create satisfaction. The second type is motivation factors or individuals' growth needs. Meeting these needs contribute to satisfaction. This model contrasts with the more traditional one-factor theory, which assumes that an asymmetric relationship exists between attribute performance and satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2015) in the sense that as attributes related to performance increase (or decrease), so too does satisfaction increase (or decrease) in the same proportion, Zhang et al. (2015, p. 451). As it happens, the two-factor theory can be used to measure customer satisfaction more accurately, which has important practical implications for practitioners who need to prioritise how to spend scarce resources on improving services (Swan & Combs, 1976).

Customer satisfaction is one of the most studied topics in the management literature generally. In tourism management, increasing tourists' satisfaction is central to destination operations strategy (Chen et al., 2016; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Nevertheless, managers also must understand customer dissatisfaction to maintain sustainable businesses operations (Zhang et al., 2015), especially given that the negative effects of customer dissatisfaction on services can outweigh the positive effects of satisfaction (Vargo et al., 2007). The impact of negative reviews is up to ten times stronger than that of positive reviews (Schlossberg, 1991).

High levels of customer satisfaction enhance repurchase intentions, customer loyalty, and positive word of mouth (Gursoy et al., 2018) and a high degree of customer satisfaction is the most solid indicator that clients will post favourable online comments about the company (Anderson et al., 1994). On the other hand, dissatisfied tourists spread negative reviews online and make formal complaints (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). The recent increased focus on negative feedback is a consequence of Web 2.0, which features large amounts of UGC on web platforms such as social networks and traveller reviews (Ayeh et al., 2013). Thus, negative comments posted online need to be examined as well, given their potential impact on purchase intentions (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008).

2.3. User-generated content in hospitality and tourism

User-generated content (UGC) is ever-increasing, due to the rapid growth of Web 2.0 applications (Sigala Sigala, 2009), in both quantity and importance in the online tourism industry (Ye et al., 2011). The main reason to study UGC in tourism is that "social media contents are weighted heavily by tourists as more trusted and reliable travel information" (Zhang et al., 2015, p. 1). Independent UGC is a reliable source of information tourists now have that enables them to search for possible destinations, transportation, accommodation, and leisure activities before purchasing these services (Akehurst, 2009). In the tourism context, online user-generated reviews about travel destinations,

hotels, and tourism services have become important sources of information for prospective travellers (Pan et al., 2007). A more reliable source of information about hotel service quality has appeared and involves past visitors' reviews mostly provided through online booking systems (e.g. Bajari & Hortacsu 2004; Ye et al., 2011).

Past research has shown that customers tend to trust reviews posted online more than other content created by marketing or advertising agencies (Kardon, 2007). A possible explanation for this could be that consumers assume that companies tend to disguise negative reviews, whereas customers provide honest reviews (Park et al., 2007). Sparks and Browning (2011) found that it is hard for customers to trust information appearing on tourist service providers' websites and consumers seem to be more influenced by early customers' negative information, especially when the overall appraisal is negative. Researchers have concluded that online consumer reviews are more likely than other data sources to contain reliable information that is rich in detail and relevant (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

The importance of the Internet in the image formation process has been recently recognised by both academics and practitioners The influence of the Internet on destination image is yet to be fully revealed as the virtual environment is broad and content appears on different platforms, such as blogs and web forums, which might have different effects on the image held by tourists (Jani & Hwang, 2011). Hospitality and tourism organisations also need to appreciate how consumers search for reviews online to accumulate information for their making their travel decisions (Choi et al., 2007). Overall, compared to traditional research methods that use surveys, UGC analysis has several advantages as a methodology, including data availability and facility of data collection, (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). This has facilitated the theoretical framework and analysis approach used in the current study. Hospitality and tourism research can thus generate credible UGC analysis to study post-purchase experiences, which should have both theoretical and managerial implications.

3. Methodology

3.1. Information source: TripAdvisor

We used the largest travel platform – TripAdvisor – to retrieve tourists' reviews in English (Ahani et al., 2019). The top five countries – China, Japan, Germany, Russia, and Italy – were chosen to study the thalassotherapy industry, as they account for 77.33% of global revenues (Yeung & Johnston, 2014). The thalassotherapy spas and resorts selected were all five-star facilities offering Primary Wellness and Primary Therapeutic or Curative treatments. In order to be included in our sample, tourists' reviews had to mention some type of therapy and the trip had to be primarily motivated by wellness tourism.

In concert with Mohsin and Lockyer (2010, p. 171), who argue that in luxury hotels "… it is the service in the hotel that makes the difference", this study selected luxury facilities around the globe to assess the attributes that can be set as higher standard attributes in hospitality and have a significant impact on hotels. We focused on service, in particular, upscale thalassotherapy spa and resort establishments that offer wellness treatments and therapies or curative care (Yeung & Johnston, 2014).

TripAdvisor numerical ratings that capture customers' evaluations of service quality or satisfaction in stars (1-Terrible and 2-Poor) and (4-Very-Good and 5-Excellent) were used

as the quantitative measure of the level of customer satisfaction. We excluded comments that rated their experiences with three stars-Average, as we intended to measure extreme reviews that capture satisfaction and dissatisfaction. We did not collect reviewers' gender, age, or travel motivation due to the high percentage of missing data. The usable data (extracted by automation) included 3116 reviews containing 327,960 words.

Table 1 has the origin, therapy service used, groupings, and satisfaction percentage of tourists visiting thalassotherapy spas and resorts. The sample is balanced between European (51%) and Asian (49%) reviewers. Most reviewers had travelled as a couple (41.01%) or family (33.95%). More than half of the reviewers stated that their experience was either Very Good or Excellent.

3.2. Data analysis

The Leximancer text analytics software (edition 4.5) is used to analyse the data-set describing tourists' satisfaction with their experiences. This software bases its analytical procedures on Bayesian statistical theory and accumulates fragmented pieces of evidence that best portray what is occurring in the texts under study (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). The software is widely used in management and marketing. For example, it was used in accumulating data from travel blogs in China to study destination image. Lai and To (2015) used Leximancer to extract meaning and analyse social media in Macao, Wu et al. (2014) examined international tourists' experiences in Beijing's Silk Market using the platform, and in the field of Medical Tourism and health Rodrigues et al. (2017) investigated medical tourists' postings regarding experiences in cosmetic and dental procedures.

The software generates a thesaurus and applies a machine-learning algorithm to determine the optimal thesaurus of words from the text data, grouping these by themes and displaying the results in a concept map (Leximancer Pty Ltd, 2016). This kind of map helps

Table 1. Tourists' profile by number of reviews.

|	Reviews (3116)	Percentage (%)
Reviews by country		
China	872	27.98
Japan	654	20.03
Germany	436	13.99
Italy	717	23.01
Russia	436	14.99
Therapy		
Thalassotherapy	1153	37.00
Swimming pool treatments	779	25.00
Spa treatments	530	17.01
Wrapping	405	12.99
Other treatments	249	8.00
Travel group		
As a couple	1278	41.01
With family	1059	33.95
With friends	343	11.01
While on business	312	10.01
Travelling alone	125	4.02
Satisfaction ratings		
4-Very-Good and 5-Excellent	1986	63.74
1-Terrible and 2-Poor	1130	36.26
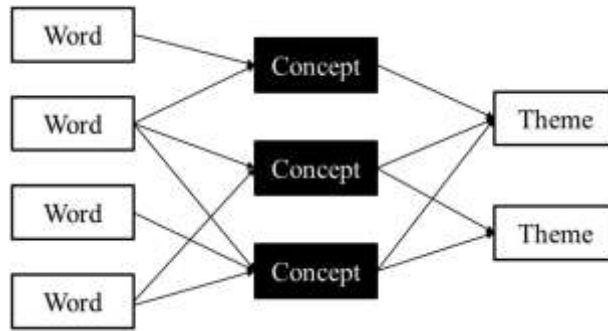
Figure 1. Simplified model of semantic pattern extraction. Adapted from Leximancer.

analysts gain insights into and comprehension of natural language through a three-part process (Crofts & Bisman, 2010) as seen in Figure 1. The software extracted semantic pattern information that enabled us to identify the key concepts and themes of thalassotherapy spa and resort experiences in a concept map that includes concepts – displayed as grey dots – that are then grouped into themes – represented by coloured spheres (Wu et al., 2014).

To achieve interpretable results from the analysis, extraneous grammatical particles such as "a," "the," "as," and "I'm" were excluded. We then created a data file for the numerical ratings corresponding to the two user-defined tags that correspond to reviwes "Rate: Excellent &Very Good,"– associated with positive experiences, and a tag for reviwes Rate: "Poor &Terrible." – linked to negative experiences (see Figure 3).

Consequently, our final analysis associated the themes and concepts of wellness tourists' experiences with the extreme points (i.e. positive and negative) on the numerical review scale, as the conceptualisations and measurements of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in tourism are important tools with which to define tourism destinations and services (Alegre & Garau, 2011).

4. Results

4.1. Semantic clusterings that identify the attractiveness of thalassotherapy spas

We analysed the data using the defined tags separating reviwes from Asia and reviews from Europe to interpret the tourists' experiences, feelings, opinions, and thereby identify emergent concepts. Eight themes stood out in representing thalassotherapy spa experiences. The main themes as shown in Figure 2. The number of hits (text associated with the theme) with the most connectivity and significance close to Asia are "resort" (4262 hits), "recommendation" (882 hits), "restaurant" (1897 hits), and "staff" (1882 hits). Close to the tag Europe are "thalasso" (2050 hits), "room" (2793 hits), "pool" (1715 hits), and the "spa" (1458 hits).

4.3. Representation by satisfaction rates

We can observe the six major themes' connectivity: "restaurant", "breakfast", "recommendation", "beach", "resort", and "massage" to ratings tagged as "Excellent & Very-Good". We
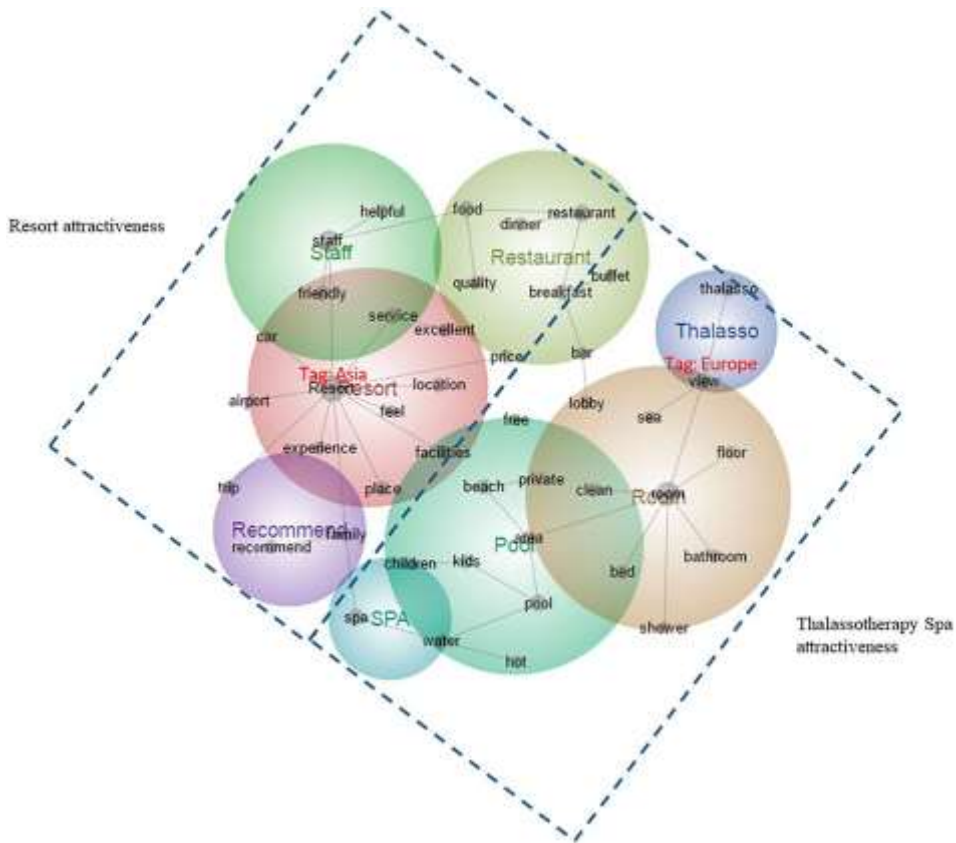
Figure 2. Clusters that identify thalassotherapy spa attractiveness, and the resort.

can also observe in Figure 3 that the tag for "Poor & Terrible" connects only to the theme "room". The themes rank as following: "the resort" (7448 hits), "room" (3465 hits), "view" (2707 hits), "massage" (2530 hits), "restaurant" (2388 hits), "beach" (2068 hits), "breakfast" (1636 hits), "pools" (1535 hits), "recommendation" (1023 hits), and "thalasso" (325 hits).

5. Discussion

To address the first objective of this study, themes and concepts were clustered using a post-experience phase involving the thalassotherapy spas and resorts with the help of a concept map and using the Leximancer tags shown in Figure 2. The themes are representative of the population from Asia (China, Japan) and Europe (Germany, Italy, and Russia) – home to more than two-thirds of the world's top hotels and spas. The findings from the study provide new insights related to five-star resort and spa facilities' attractiveness, namely the spa treatments, hot water pool, and thalasso treatments, importance of the lodging services including the accommodation and food and beverage facilities. The second part of this section addresses the second objective of the study, which involves identifying factors that relate to satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the facilities (Figure 3). The main drivers of satisfaction are found to be breakfasts in restaurant that is generally included in the room rates and the massage treatments in most resorts,

Figure 3. Representations by satisfaction level.

spas that are located near the sea. The only theme that earned a poor appraisal from guests was related to the comfort of the room.

5.1. Dominant themes and concepts representation of the attraction of thalassotherapy spa resorts

The main attractiveness of thalassotherapy spas (frequently mentioned by tourists who visited the thalassotherapy spas and resorts located in Asia) is the "resort", including the specific mention of environmental characteristics and excellent location.

location near the seawater and attractive ambience generates a pleasant experience. *China* […] a seawater pool, a spa pool and a small beach area, there were several decked pontoons scattered around the rocks where you sunbathe while listening as the waves hit the rocks underneath you […] *Japan*

Previous studies also emphasise that wellness destinations are often located in excellent geographic regions close to natural resources (Konu, 2015; Pyke et al., 2016). The current study finds that wellness tourism represents an opportunity for local tourism development specifically when combined with a pleasant experience of recreational activities and

traditional therapies that use seawater for treatment. Sheldon and Park (2009, p. 11) also found that wellness tourism "encompasses a range of tourism experiences in destinations with wellness products, appropriate infrastructures, facilities, and natural and wellness resources". Tourists who seek health treatments tend to stay for long periods. This study highlights the importance of tourism as a long lasting service experience.

The results also strengthen the importance given to food and beverage as a core component of the hospitality industry (Ekiz et al., 2012) and the quality of the food is a critical attribute in health resorts (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). The theme "restaurant" primarily emphasises the quality of food in breakfast buffets and additional dining services of restaurants, highlighting the importance of healthy eating and nutrition in wellness tourism. A *China* review mentioned

> […] great resort (good food breakfast, lunch and dinner had a lot of healthy options) lunch at a beach bar was great […] both restaurants are well run in excellent locations, the food is of an extremely high standard. Everything is dealt with efficiently […].

The theme "recommendation" overlaps with "resort", which encompasses customers' intentions to revisit the resorts located in Asia.

> When you arrive the resort is impressive, nice spa and gym, open lobby out to the sea, nice pool and grounds, rooms are great and mine looked over the gardens and pool to the sea. I spent one week in this pleasant resort, and I can strongly recommend it […] I can't wait to go back for a more relaxing trip soon in season and use the resort spa and more of facilities. (*Japan*)

Multiple studies have shown that satisfied tourists are more likely to repurchase products or recommend them to others (Gallarza & Saura, 2006).

Finally, the results revealed that in terms of thalassotherapy service quality, the customers' quotes highlight friendly and helpful "staff" attitudes as an important feature.

> […] The Best of the hotel, the staff. Thank you very much for your attention. *Italy*

> […] Lovely stay. The staff are very, very friendly and helpful. Our rooms were cleaned and made up each day […] (*China*)

> Best management and staff with Genuine care […] The service is personal and the staff are kind and always willing to help. (*China*)

These results are in agreement with Han and Hyun (2015) and Zhang and Mao's (2012) findings, as both studies confirm the connection between friendly staff and tourists' revisit intentions. Staff interaction with guests is the essence of the hospitality business and this interaction is important to promote revisit intentions (Ekiz et al., 2012). Since people are among its biggest asset, the spa industry needs a strong pipeline along which well-trained staff can pursue their career goals (Yeung & Johnston, 2014). Trained staff can minimise turnover intentions and provide high standards of service.

Attractiveness for the tourists that visit the thalassotherapy spas in Europe is related to the "thalasso" treatments focused on health and rehabilitation – treatments (i.e. thalasso treatments, pool activities, spa therapies, and wrapping treatments) using seawater.

> Well located with plenty to do during the day including spa treatments. The thalassotherapy pool is fantastic so much so we used it several times! Best massages ever […] (*Russia*)

> Also, we are particularly delighted that you appreciated the four thalassotherapy pools in our Spa. The circuit is really relaxing and has a revitalizing, antimicrobial, and cleansing effect on the water. (*Italy*)

Prior research conducted by Meyer (2014) provided evidence of the use of seawater therapies in wellness tourism and their significance in the development of spa tourism (Dimitrovski & Todorović, 2015). Thalassotherapy treatments claim to improve numerous health disorders, especially among and elderly (Kurtulmuşoğlu & Esiyok, 2017). Policy makers can recognise the benefits of seawater treatments as a complement to more traditional health therapies and put in place regulatory standards and enforce legislation that can help reduce national health costs and hospitalisation.

The current study suggests that hot pools and recreational pools are central to spa facilities, so "pool" and "spa" are two significant themes that overlap in the concept map. Families who travel with babies and children appreciate excellent recreational water activities, which wellness tourism providers need to keep in mind when targeting this demographic segment.

> […] The private pool was great for the kids [… .] The private spa was never crowded and although it was peak holiday season and the resort fully booked, we always found sun loungers by the pool to our amazement […] (*Germany*)

> […] The most relaxing spa experience of my life, wrapped in warm luxurious blankets after the final dunk in 4 degree water, I am relaxing just thinking of it […] (*Russia*)

The present results are in line with Marković et al.'s (2014) findings of the importance of additional services in wellness tourism, such as recreational activities and social and entertainment programmes centred around hot pools and spas.

From the concept map (Figure 2) we can also observe that the theme "room" overlaps with "thalassotherapy"and "pool" and relates to concepts that include room comfort, private spaces, bathroom, shower, a comfortable bed, and cleanliness.

> […] Fabulous rooms, more spacious than other resorts, bathroom is big. Every room has a large balcony (mostly overlooking beach/pool from higher floors and garden from lower floors) with nice seating arrangement […] (*Italy*)

> […]The rooms are very nicely done, with balconies looking out over the valley … (very comfortable) bed […] (*Germany*)

Wellness tourists tend to stay for longer healing periods and tend to choose resorts with positive reviews mentioning room comfort and related amenities (Noel, 2010). Room comfort is a core attribute of any hotel, and room quality is always at the centre of the hotel's image (Cadotte & Tugeon, 1988). Since Room comfort is a determining factor in guests' selection of hotels (Saleh & Ryan, 1992), so lodging providers should take into account customers' strong perceptions of room comfort and room view because of their influence on the decision-making processes.

5.2. Factors representing satisfaction/dissatisfaction levels of tourists' experience

Positive or negative online reviews and ratings can have a substantial impact on prospective tourists and their purchase intentions (Schuckert et al., 2015). The excellent and very

good ratings group tended to concentrate their reviews on food quality, with a strong focus on restaurants' overall service quality and hotel breakfasts. Because most resorts related to wellness tourism offer some sort of physical and nutritional education, as well as healthy fresh food, visitors logically expect this benefit (Voigt et al., 2011). Furthermore, food and beverage attributes can differentiate hotels from other players in terms of competitive edge (Spangenberg et al., 2003).

Resorts and their beaches also receive positive comments mostly related to the resorts' location and friendly staff, with customers expressing their appreciation of resort locations closer to a beach. The emergence of spa facilities has also added a new standard feature to global luxury hotels and resorts (Chen et al., 2013). The present results agree with those of Pan et al.'s (2007) findings that destinations' strengths are, at least in part, their cultural heritage, hospitality, location (i.e. beaches), and activities (i.e. water-related ones).

Thalassotherapy spas range in the variety of services, most offerings are built mainly around traditional massages and water therapies (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006). Wellness tourism presents business opportunities (Pyke et al., 2016), so the present results suggest that wellness destinations should not only continue to offer traditional therapies that are always in high-demand but also create new combinations of water and massage therapies to refresh their portfolio of offerings.

The vast majority of tourists' reviews recommend that prospective tourists spend time in resorts that offer thalassotherapy treatments. The relationship between hotel image and consumers' behavioural intentions has received greater emphasis in the literature, with a prior investigation finding a relationship between positive perceptions of travellers' brand choices and positive e-word of mouth (Zhang & Mao, 2012).

Service quality is a global perception of or attitude related to excellent overall service (Parasuraman & Zeithaml, 1988). The present results indicate that when resort managers improve service quality, customer satisfaction increases (Marković et al., 2014). Reviews focused on rooms included the highest number of complaints, from guests who rated room conditions as poor or terrible. These findings are consistent with past research on complaining behaviours in the hospitality industry (Ekiz, 2009). Overall, the results highlight the importance of private accommodations in promoting satisfaction with hospitality facilities (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Negative comments posted online and poor ratings can influence hotels' reputations and their guests' repurchase intentions (Ayeh et al., 2013). In line with the latter's results, we found that hospitality and tourism businesses need to put in place mechanisms for monitoring social media platforms. This can help hotel managers to identify negative UGC reviews of their services and respond accordingly.

5.3. Practical implications

The present research suggests strategies based on tourists' preferences regarding service attributes of the thalassotherapy sector within wellness tourism. First, management should continue to assess the wellness tourism business strengths and weaknesses and monitor the vulnerable area highlighted in our study, namely the room comfort. Hotel design favours investment in the décor of common areas, and designers tend to neglect what tourists appreciate most, i.e. the quality of their room. Hotel and destination

managers can analyse UGC and then address customer complaints and suggestions, framing business strategies that can minimise negative e-word of mouth (Cox et al., 2009). Second, the term "spa" has been overused. Clear communication by and labels for thalassotherapy spa and resort facilities could mitigate any misconceptions and communication problems for this important sector of wellness tourism. More precise labels could also contribute to service differentiation, motivation of tourists, and management of their expectations (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006).

Finally, guests often note their interactions with staff as a key determinant in the wellness tourism attractiveness. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) advocate that in services friendliness of the staff has a positive effect on how guests perceive service quality. In the context of health tourism in particular, service quality is measured by the level of professional staff skills, competencies, and ability to communicate (Giese & Cote, 2009). Formal training and professional accreditation is also a requirement for spa therapists and consequently investing in the staff's technical training in health and wellness tourism is another strong determinant for thalassotherapy spas (Smith & Kelly, 2006).

5.4. Theoretical implications

The present study's results have several theoretical implications. First, this study adds to the literature on thalassotherapy spas' and resorts' the main drivers of satisfaction among tourists and combines customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction rates in a single concept map based on tourists' web reviews in 5 star resorts. Second, this study's results confirm the value of exploring new sources of data for research (Ballantyne et al., 2009), showing that analysing qualitative data from user-generated online reviews of thalassotherapy experiences produces useful insights, helping to reveal attractiveness and service quality attributes for luxury hotels and resorts. The third theoretical contribution is that different satisfaction groups must be represented by subgroups of satisfaction in data analyses.

Last, selecting UGC as a data source facilitates using genuine data to identify satisfaction and dissatisfaction in hospitality (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). With the help of Leximancer, we were able to aggregate data according to tourists' satisfaction and dissatisfaction and text tags by continent in addition to UGC data, which can be considered an original contribution – broadingen the application of research in tourism and hospitality using UGC.

This research thus adds to the literature on satisfaction by classifying wellness tourism attributes specific to the thalassotherapy industry. When a specific market is under performing assets need to be managed carefully, the present research also provides guidelines to develop or improve service attributes that can maximise guests' satisfaction and avoid dissatisfaction (Figure 3). Even though this research does not study individual countries, it addresses two important geographic regions: Europe, which continues to lead in the wellness market revenues, and Asia, which has surpassed Europe in the number of spas (Global Wellness Institute, Global Wellness Economy Monitor, January 2017). For both continents, wellness tourism represents an opportunity for domestic tourists in Europe, due mainly to the rise of the US dollar, which decreases overseas tourism and represents an opportunity for the aging population to enjoy and benefit from wellness treatments in their own countries in off-peak seasons.

In addition, this study contributes a new service quality measurement scale for luxury hotels and a 3-D IPA approach for researchers to perform their further studies.

6. Conclusion

Tourists' reviews posted on TripAdvisor about thalassotherapy resort facilities provided the data, and Leximancer was used to extract meaning in a visual concept map, contributing to the wellness tourism literature is the conceptualisation of themes and concepts that drive tourism satisfaction in this niche market.

We identified eight themes based on the concept map (Figure 3) of tourists' overall representations. The most frequently mentioned themes cluster around resorts' facilities and locations, especially nice rooms and impressive thalasso treatments. Customers' positive experiences hinge upon the fine service provided by restaurant service and the friendly staff. Ratings of poor or terrible are most often associated with room elements such as space and views.

The limitations linked to the study include the fact that the reviews are from upscale facilities that offer thalassotherapy treatments in five countries in Asia and Europe. There could be subjectivity in the review responses. Another limitation is that the number of reviews associated with poor or terrible ratings from TripAdvisor is less compared to the positive reviews.

Future research of thalassotherapy tourism can use the same approach to other geographies, namely in the important market of North America. Our research was an initial effort to develop a deeper understanding of the increasingly significant field of wellness tourism, and we hope that others will go on to contribute broader and deeper analyses of this intriguing tourism niche. Thalassotherapy spas and resorts have an important role in promoting health and wellness tourism. Effective management strategies as proposed in this study can help revive old spa infrastructures and help individuals who seek treatment or leisure activities to meet their expectations. Based on the results future studies should explore why tourists in Asia appreciate all-inclusive resorts, whilst those in Europe seem to travel for the main purpose of Thalassotherapy treatments.

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