

## Motivations for Visiting Smokovo's Thermal Springs

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**Abstract:** *The natural-based health and wellness industry is growing rapidly all over the world, making it a vital tourism market in a country's economy. Health tourism in Greece has been connected mainly with tourism in thermal springs and balneology for curative purposes. Thermal spring and thermal bath therapy are acknowledged as an alternative form of health tourism, and with 82 thermal spring units operating in the country, it can be regarded as a potential tourism sector. In this context, this paper reports the outcome of research that measures customer's motivations for visiting Smokovos' thermal spring baths on a sample of 240 participants. The research was conducted by means of a questionnaire at the premises of the thermal springs/spa. Factor, cluster and chi-square tests were performed for data analysis. Three consumer clusters were obtained based on the derived four clusters, specifically "getaway visitors", "therapy seekers" and "curious and travelling-by visitors". Marketing implications are given based on outcomes. The results of this study are considered a necessity for spa marketing staff in order to apply efficient marketing to retain and increase their market share.*

**Keywords:** *Health tourism, Wellness tourism, thermal springs, motivation, marketing*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For the world economy, travel and tourism is a salient economic sector with an important role, due to the economic benefits it can provide. It increases economic growth and employment for the hosting communities, as well supporting peripheral industries (WTTC, 2012). According to the WTTC (2012) and regarding the year 2011, the total global economic impact (direct, indirect, induced) from tourism and travel was 6.3 trillion US \$ to gross domestic product (GDP); 1.2 trillion US \$ to exports; 743 million US \$ to investments and 255 million jobs.

For Greece, tourism was, and is, very important for its economy, remaining a key economic sector and an axon for development and prosperity. In the year 2011, Greece ranked 21<sup>st</sup> in Europe and 29<sup>th</sup> overall, falling 5 positions compared to the 2009 assessment (The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report, 2011). For the same year, according to the WTTC (2012), the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to the Greek GDP for the year 2011 was 12.4 billion euros (6.4% of the total GDP) and generated directly 349,500 jobs, and indirectly 758,500 (WTTC, 2012).

A new trend in tourism demand is health tourism, in its different forms. As Harmsworth (2004) state: "The health and spa market is one of the fastest growing leisure sectors, where societal trends and aspirations find instant reflection in the developments on both the demand and supply side". Health tourism in Greece is connected mainly with thermal tourism and balneology for curative purposes (Ikkos, 2002). In the country, for the year 2010, 82 thermal spring units operated, and so Greece could take advantage of this dynamic market.

This paper aims to explore people's motivations for visiting the natural thermal spring spa of Smokovo, in Karditsa, central Greece. The spa's thermal waters have a natural temperature of 37-40.2°C channelled to hydrotherapy facilities. Because the water is sulphurous alkaline, it can heal chronic rheumatism, arthritic, rheumatic and endocrinological disorders, sciatica, neuralgia, muscle aches, respiratory and gynaecological problems and skin diseases. The method of treatment is bathing and inhalation (loutrasmokovou.gr).

This paper is structured as follows: In the next section the literature is briefly discussed by reviewing some previous studies. Then the methodology is explained and the findings are discussed. Finally, the conclusions and limitations are presented.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Health tourism, a subcategory of tourism, has continuously gained ground, due to the stress of modern ways of living, the growing health consciousness of consumers, and consumer interest in returning to more nature & natural based alternative preventive and curing methods. The WTO defines health tourism as "... associated with travel to health spas or resort destinations where the primary purpose is to improve the traveler's physical well-being through a regimen of physical exercises and therapy, dietary control and medical services relevant to health maintenance" (Rulle, 2008: 20-21 in Breitrück

and Nunn, 2011). In turn, Breitrück and Nunn, (2011) state that, “continually health tourism can be seen as a general term for cure tourism and spa or wellness tourism. Cure tourism and the less medical form of spa tourism are two overlapping types as both forms are unified in the same destinations, offering health oriented services, and attracting people for the same reasons, namely the regeneration of one's physical and psychological well-being as well as treating diseases”.

Tourist motivation has been studied by countless researchers who endorse that motivation research is of great importance for a tourist destination (i.e., Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Kozak 2002; Van Der Merwe et al., 2011; Cole and Chancellor, 2012). While research on tourist motivations for visiting a destination area is plentiful, on the other hand motivation research for visiting natural thermal springs is lacking. Most of the literature found was in the context of health –wellness - spa visitation.

Tsai et al. (2012) in their study found that male spa-goers in Hong Kong visited hotel spas mainly for relaxation, while Koh et al., (2010) in researching the important reasons for visiting a hotel spa in USA, through 34 benefit variables, found 4 motivation factors: ‘social’, ‘relaxation’, ‘health’, and ‘rejuvenation’. On the other hand, Mak et al. (2009) assert that spa-goers’ motivation is related to push motives. In particular, people’s motivations to go to spas were related to ‘friendship and kinship’, ‘health and beauty’, ‘self reward and indulgence’, ‘relaxation and relief’, and ‘escape’. Relaxation was considered as the most important motive. In addition, Hsieh (2009) studied motivations for a spring destination in Taiwan, on a sample of 200 mature travelers. Factor analysis revealed four motivation factors: ‘personality and building relationships’, ‘education and learning’, ‘feeling good’, and ‘arranged treatment’. Chen and Prebenson (2009) in studying Taiwanese motivations for wellness tourism using 16 motivation items found that the most important motivational factors were ‘relaxation’, ‘pursuing multiple activities’, ‘recreation’ and ‘experiencing nature’. Moreover, Gustavo (2010) in a survey of 824 spa visitors found that the main reason for visiting a spa was relieving stress and/ or relaxation (74.3%) and secondly improving mental and physical health (>50%), while Konu and Laukkanen (2009) in studying 412 potential Finnish tourist’ motivations for wellbeing holidays, found that motivation factors connected to health, physical activity and self-development were most important in taking a wellbeing trip. Moreover, Harmsworth (2004) reported that current ESPA research revealed that the motivation of 71% of national and international spa-going customers is the search for relaxation and wellness. Lastly, Thorsteinsdottir (2005) asserts that people go to hotel spas for beauty, relaxation, and leisure.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Research was undertaken in three stages. First phase: qualitative research was applied through 6 in- depth interviews at Smokovos' thermal spring baths. Participants were chosen by convenience sampling. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed and analyzed through content analysis. The structure of the field questionnaire was based on the literature review and the results of the qualitative research. Themes analyzed in qualitative research were ‘reasons for visitation’, ‘information regarding Smokovos' thermal spring baths’, ‘expectations’, ‘satisfaction’, and ‘weaknesses’.

The second phase included questionnaire development and pre-test. The 8-page questionnaire consisted of 29 questions, of which one was associated with motivations for visitation, 19 with different aspects of the thermal spring spa and health related questions, and 9 questions referred to customer’s socioeconomic and demographic variables. The questionnaire was tested for content and face validity on a convenience sample of 35 visitors, excluded from the final sample.

Lastly, the third phase was the field research which was conducted on the premises of the thermal springs/spa of Smokovo Karditsa with a convenience sample of 240 visitors. Data analysis was collected mainly with personal interviews, and some with aided self-administrated questionnaires. Data analysis included descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and means), factor, hierarchical, K-means cluster analysis and chi-square tests.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Demographics

Regarding the participants’ demographic and socioeconomic status, 49% of the sample was females, 64% was 65+ years of age, 71% was married, 53% did not finish elementary school, 45% were pensioners, and 64% had a net family income up to 1200 Euros.

#### 4.2 Factor -Cluster analysis

The 11 motivational attributes which derived from the qualitative research and literature review, and considered important for Smokovo visitors were 1) Therapeutic reasons (MS=3.31); 2) To rest and relax (MS=2.79); 3) Body care/pampering (MS=2.48); 4) Skin care-therapy (MS=4.07); 5) I followed friends or family (MS=3.50); 6) From curiosity (MS=2.72); 7) I was taking a trip -visiting the wider area, and I came here also (MS=2.64); 8) Escape from routine (MS=4.04); 9) My doctor recommended it (MS=4.11); 10) My friends/ family recommended it (MS=4.26); 11) I was influenced by advertising (MS=2.42). The 11 motivation items were factor analyzed and 4 factors (KMO=0.698; BTS=416.935; df=55; p=0.00, interpreting 61.9% of total variance) derived were: *Relaxation and pampering* (Rest and relax, Body care/pampering, escape from routine, and followed friends or family), *Therapeutic reasons* (therapy, skin care, doctors recommendation, friends or family recommendation), *Curiosity* (Curiosity, advertisement), *Tourism* (was visiting the area and came here also) interpreting 21.6%; 15.0%; 14.9%; and 10.4% of total variance respectively.

The derived factors were cluster analyzed in order to group visitors based on their motives to visit Smokovo's thermal spring baths. First hierarchical cluster analysis was performed in order to investigate the number of clusters that would emerge, and K-means cluster analysis were continuously performed. The analysis resulted in a three cluster solution. Multivariate statistics indicated statistical significances difference between the three clusters where all items contributed to differentiate the three visitor clusters. Each segment's Final Cluster Centers (FCC), the sample size, and ANOVA test results are presented in Table 1. Chi-square tests were performed in order to investigate statistical differences between consumers' socioeconomic and demographic variables (gender, age, marital status, profession, and income), and clusters derived. Chi-square tests revealed that in only one case statistical difference existed: gender ( $\chi^2_2=1.607$ ;  $p=0.467$ ); age ( $\chi^2_4=6.990$ ;  $p=0.135$ ); marital status age ( $\chi^2_6=3.979$ ;  $p=0.686$ ); education ( $\chi^2_6=3.979$ ;  $p=0.686$ ); profession ( $\chi^2_4=8.525$ ;  $p=0.071$ ); and income ( $\chi^2_6=14.866$ ;  $p=0.021$ ).

**Table 1: Segments of the Smokovo's thermal spring visitors based on motivations**

Motivation Factors	1 <sup>st</sup> cluster, n=91	2 <sup>nd</sup> cluster, n=91	3 <sup>rd</sup> cluster, n=58	Statistics
<i>Relaxation and pampering</i> (Rest and relaxation, Body care/ pampering, escape from routine, and followed friends or family)	4.02	2.66	3.39	F=51.338 (p=0.000)
<i>Therapeutic reasons</i> (therapy, skin care, doctors recommendation, friends or family recommendation)	3.86	4.14	3.40	F=24.545 (p=0.000)
<i>Curiosity</i> (Curiosity, advertisement)	2.20	1.96	3.54	F=142.566 (p=0.000)
<i>Tourism</i> (was visiting the area and came here also)	2.30	2.19	3.70	F=56.294 (p=0.000)

Sample size: n=240

The three segments obtained via K-means cluster analysis were:

*Cluster I: Getaway visitors.* The first cluster represents 37.9% of the total sample size, and tends to be the getaway visitors. This cluster comprises mainly of men, age 65 +years old, single, with a monthly salary (private or public employee or on pension) and income <800.00 euros. They are seeking relaxation and rest, escaping routine, doing something relaxing for themselves such as body care therapy, or following a family member or friend (FCC>4.00). Secondly, they come for therapeutic reasons, probably in the sense of prevention rather than the curative form.

*Cluster II: Therapy Seekers.* The second cluster represents also 37.9% of the sample. This consumer segment consists of women, age 66+ years old, married, education up to elementary school, and with a net family monthly income 800.01-1200.00 euros. They mainly came to Smokovo's spring bath for therapeutic reasons (theirs or their family's or friends) i.e. rheumatism, for skin care, due to doctor's recommendation and because their friends or family recommended it (FCC>4.00). Since this cluster is motivated only by health reasons, it has the lowest FCC for all the other clusters.

*Cluster III: Travelling-by and intriguing visitors.* The third cluster represents 24.2% of the total sample size. This consumer segment consists of men and women at about the same percentage, age 66+ years old, married, and net family monthly income up to 800.00 euros. This cluster does not have any FCC>4.00, but are tourists who visited the wider area as a tourism destination and decided to stop by and visit the thermal baths, as well as curious- intrigued spa visitors who have heard about the thermal spring baths and wanted to try their services or even have a coffee there.

## 5. DISCUSSION

These findings are partially consistent with the findings of previous researchers (i.e., Tsai et al., 2012; Koh et al., 2010; Gustavo 2009; Mak et al., 2009). All previous studies, found that one main motivation for visiting a spa is resting and relaxation. While researchers found that socializing, building personality, or leisure is one of the key motivators for spa visitation, this study had only one item regarding social motivation (followed friends or family), mainly because other items did not appear in the qualitative research. This, in connection to the participants' age, leads to the conclusion that the thermal spring spa of Smokovo Karditsa, in the customers mind, is linked to therapy or health prevention, supporting Ikkos (2002), and not to leisure, and thus mostly appeals to the elderly.

This suggests the need for a repositioning of the thermal spring baths of Smokovo. Up to now, the thermal bath/spa destination was, and still is, considered to be for mainly curative and preventive reasons. Repositioning must be done that rebrands it as a "wellness destination", aimed also at younger markets. The thermal springs are sited outside "developed areas" combining the lavish and unique nature of the mountains and lakes. Some marketing directions based on the analysis are: For those that are in cluster I, "the get away visitors", marketing communication techniques can point out that thermal spring baths are unique for health prevention. On the other hand, for those that seek therapy, marketing communication strategies can point out other benefits of the spa destination, such as body and skin care, to get away from everyday routine,

and to relax from work stress. Lastly, for the last cluster, the tourists, the unique thermal spring baths/ spa benefits should be included in a marketing communication program, to raise awareness and interest, point out value for money, and the uniqueness of the experience.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The study set out to explore visitors' motivations for visiting Smokovos' thermal spring baths. This research has contributed to the practical improvement of the performance of the spa industry in Karditsa, Greece by investigating customer's motivations for visiting the thermal spring's baths of Smokovo. The results of the analysis reveal variations in visitors' motivations. These results can be used as basis for improving customer satisfaction.

Although there was an attempt to minimize limitations when designing this research, some still exist and need to be mentioned. Furthermore, they could provide guidance for future research in the sector. First of all, the outcomes of this study may not have represented all spa-goers in Smokovo Karditsa, since a non-probability sampling process was used to gather the data. Moreover, the study was conducted in one out of 82 of the thermal springs operating in Greece. Thus, future studies that would include more thermal springs could be performed to validate the findings.

Despite the current limitations, the findings of the present study provide practitioners and academics useful insights and a better understanding of the current nature of the demand for thermal spring baths/ spa's in the Greek context, where a paucity of research has been observed. Vasileiou and Tsartas (2009), assert that although the wellness tourism market in Greece is an unmapped area with some structural issues to solve, it shows potential for future growth. However, the competition in the industry is increasing, especially from neighbouring countries and thus it is necessary to differentiate and enrich the composition of the Greek wellness and health tourism product. However, the climate of Greece is a natural factor that already adds to the development of a successive and competitive product (Didaskalou et al., 2004).

Therefore, local authorities and central government should focus on creating an organized tourism development plan in these thermal spring spa destinations, which, in terms of tourism, are less developed and have been neglected since the priority has been the popular tourist destinations (Priporas and Kamenidou, 2003). Thermal spring/spas could be the vehicle for economic development and prosperity for these destinations, particularly now, when there is a growing senior population in the West which is becoming an increasingly attractive tourist market. According to Tawil (2011), the Baby Boomer generation (45-60 years old) remains the core consumer base for the global spa tourism industry and their motivations must be taken into account.

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