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### Spa-goers' Characteristics, Motivations, Preferences and Perceptions: Evidence from Elounda, Crete

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#### ABSTRACT

Spa and wellness tourism is one of the fastest-growing market segments in the hospitality and tourism industry. The aim of this study is to investigate and identify spa-goers' characteristics, motivations, preferences and perceptions, providing a better understanding of the main features of this type of tourists' behavior and expectations from a spa and wellness centre. Primary quantitative research was conducted via a structured questionnaire in a sample of 123 spa customers at Elounda in Crete. The results of the study revealed a number of important factors that influence them when choosing a spa, namely the cleanliness and the maintenance of a spa, the staff knowledge and hygiene, the personnel behavior and courtesy, and the quality of services. In addition, the main reason for visiting the spa is for stress relief/relaxation, followed by physical health improvement and beauty treatments. Findings and discussion of this study are useful to industry practitioners (spa and wellness service providers who wish to develop appropriate marketing strategies and enhance customer satisfaction) and academic researchers interested in spa and wellness tourism.

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**Keywords:** Spa; Wellness; Tourism; Motivations; Crete

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify spa visitors' characteristics, motivations, preferences and perceptions, providing a better understanding of the main features of this type of tourists' behavior and expectations from a spa and wellness centre. The tourism industry is continually developing and expanding to meet the needs of changing consumer expectations. The significance of undertaking or consuming tourism has always had a link with the associated benefits of health, well-being and rejuvenation (Tresidder, 2011). Individual health and well-being are universal desires shared by people across all ages, incomes, beliefs, cultures, and continents. As more and more consumers take preventive measures to maintain good mind and body health, prevent diseases, and to age well as they live longer, the demand for wellness industry products and services will only increase. In fact, the global wellness economy – which encompasses many industries that enable consumers to incorporate wellness into their lives – is estimated at \$3.4 trillion in 2013 (Global Wellness Institute, 2014).

Within this economy, wellness tourism is estimated to total \$494 billion or 14.6 percent of all 2013 domestic and international tourism expenditures. Defined as “all travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal wellbeing” (Global Wellness Institute, 2014, p. v), wellness tourism has recorded remarkable growth in the recent years, making it as one of the fastest-growing market segments in the hospitality and tourism industry. An ever-growing number of wellness-minded consumers are integrating healthy habits and activities into their travels, partly to counter a host of negative, travel related health impacts such as jet lag, poor sleep, and disruption of healthy eating and exercise (Global Wellness Institute, 2014).

As a result, spas and wellness centres are becoming important revenue sources for hotels, resorts and destinations. In fact, spa therapies have been around since ancient times, but these practices are now being rediscovered, integrated and branded to create a new global industry that draws from a range of aligned industries (Cohen, 2008). Spas are no longer simply places to take the waters or undergo treatments, but have instead become places that mix pampering and wellness by offering relaxation, fitness and stress relief (Tresidder, 2011). Spas are now springing up all over the world and have become a standard feature of luxury hotels and resorts (Cohen, 2008). Not surprisingly, the spa industry has been growing by 7.7% annually, from \$60 billion in 2007 to \$94 billion in 2013, while the number of spas has increased by 6.7% annually since 2007 and is estimated at 105,591 in 2013. Spas employed more than 1.9 million people in 2013, and when revenues are considered, Europe is the world's largest spa market, because of its relatively higher average revenues per spa (Global Wellness Institute, 2014).

Despite the enormous growth and potential of the spa and wellness market, little attention has been paid to consumers of these services. There is generally a lack of empirical studies on spa tourism motivation in understanding the fundamental needs of the spa goers during holiday (Rančić, Pavić, & Mijatov, 2014). This paper comes to partly fill this gap and contribute to the spa literature by providing insights into spa-goers' characteristics and behavior. It is known that the basic principle of marketing

science and consumer behavior is that the consumer freely decides what to consume and what to reject, so he should always be the focus of any business activity. We must always remember that without tourists there can be no tourism, and recognize that if we are to manage tourism effectively, we need to understand tourists and their behavior (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2007). Consequently, in order to successfully market or meet the demands of spa and wellness travelers, a deep understanding of these group's unique characteristics and their key motivations when visiting a spa and wellness centre is crucial.

The paper is divided into five parts. Following this introduction, section 1 presents a literature review on research related to spa-goers' characteristics, behavior and motivations. Section 2, introduces the methodology of the research, while section 3 elaborates on the results, presenting both the demographic characteristics of the respondents, as well as several aspects of their experience in a resort spa. Finally, in section 4 the main conclusions, along with the implications of the research and the limitations encountered are discussed.

## **1. Literature Review**

A number of the available studies focus on spa-goers' characteristics, preferences, behaviour and satisfaction. Kucukusta and Guillet (2014) investigated the preferences of spa-goers. Their findings revealed that mid-level prices, a high level of therapist qualifications, a high level of privacy, a full range of spa facilities, and branded spa products are preferred by customers. Moreover, therapist qualifications, price, and level of privacy are found to be the most important attributes in making spa bookings. Chen, Chang and Wu (2013) identified eight crucial customer service factors that can be used for determining the preferences of older consumers in wellness tourism. From high to low, they are personnel services, environments, healthy diet, relaxation, health promotion treatments, experience of unique tourism resources, social activities, and mental learning. Valentine (2016) also explored the wellness preferences of tourists in Jamaica and found that the main preferences concern natural remedies, wellness competencies and mind therapies, while less importance is given to culinary tours, mineral baths, community involvement and nature experiences. Guillet and Kucukusta (2016) used cluster analysis in order to segment spa customers based on their preferences for a set of spa attributes. They identified four customer segments: spa enthusiasts (the larger segment among the four), high spenders, value seekers and price-sensitive spa-goers. Guo, Guillet, Kucukusta, and Law (2016) identified four distinct spa customers segments based on their preferences: treatment-oriented spa goers, guarantee-sensitive spa goers, price-sensitive spa goers, and fewer days advance booking seekers. Pesonen, Laukkanen and Komppula (2011) also tried to segment wellbeing tourists according to the benefits they seek from local wellbeing products. They concluded in four segments of wellbeing tourists: outdoor types, nature enthusiasts, sightseers and culturals. Similarly, Voigt, Brown and Howat (2011) divided wellness tourists into three categories – beauty spa, lifestyle resort, and spiritual retreat visitors – and compared the benefits sought by these different types of tourists. In total, six benefit factors emerged from their analysis, namely physical health and

appearance, transcendence, escape and relaxation, re-establish self-esteem, novelty and indulgence.

According to Smith and Puczko (2009), mainly women are involved in wellness activities. The reason for this is that women have always been far more interested in physical appearance, weight issues, make-up, and hair care than men. This is partly due to social expectation, fashion, media pressure, and so forth, but it has meant that day spas and beauty salons are more regularly frequented by women. Then again, Sherman, Clemenz and Phillip (2007) recognize that there is an emerging male market within the spa industry and consider if men and women differ in their service preferences at spas. Their analysis indicated significant gender differences on the importance ratings in most of the common spa services: aromatherapy, body scrub and exfoliation, facial, fitness facilities, lymph drainage, manicure, mud or seaweed wrap, pedicure, Pilates, Shiatsu, sport massage, and yoga. On the other hand, the services that men and women rated similarly in decreasing order of importance were Swedish massage, nutritional counselling, steam and sauna, hydrotherapy, spa cuisine, and reflexology. Tsai, Suh and Fong (2007) aimed also to understand male spa-goers, as they recognise them as a growing customer segment. The results of their study indicate that the most cited reason why male spa-goers patronized a hotel spa was relaxation, and the most consumed service was body massage. Towards that direction, Keri, Ottenbacher and Harrington (2007) agree that more men are visiting spas than ever before. They argue that the rise in male visits may be attributable, at least in part, to a higher comfort level associated with spas brought about by gender neutral designs, male-focused treatments, and reduced stigma surrounding the product. Regarding their preferences, they found that stress reduction is the number one reason people are likely to visit spas, followed by relaxation, rejuvenation, fitness, wellness, improved quality of life, pain reduction and an all-around experience. In terms of the distinguishable components of service, people seek consistency, convenience, full service establishments, product knowledge, and the feeling of escape.

As motivation can be considered one of the most significant aspects among a number of variables that explain tourist behavior, a number of studies on spa-goers mainly focus on their motivations. Tourism motivation theories seek to answer why tourists travel and the underlying psychological processes (Heitmann, 2011). Konu and Laukkanen (2010) tried to predict tourists' interest in wellbeing holidays exploring their motivations in contrast with tourists who are not interested in wellbeing holidays. They identified several pull factors (water park and/or spa, natural sites, easy access to the destination) and push factors (refreshing myself, experiencing fashionable/trendy places, aesthetic experiences) which together with previous experience of wellbeing holidays and the number of annual holiday trips significantly increase the likelihood of tourists being interested in taking wellbeing holidays. Kamata (2016) divided Japanese spa tourists into three segments according their motivation factors: relaxation seekers, annual seekers and active tourists. Another study from Mak, Wong and Chung (2009) revealed several factors that motivate travellers to visit spas, with the most important of them to be relaxation and relief, escape, self-reward and indulgence, and health and beauty. In addition, Chen, Prebensen and Huan (2008) found that relaxation, pursuing multiple activities, recreation, and enjoying nature are the top four motivations, while in terms of the ranks of importance, relaxation is the leading indicator. Dimitrovski and Todorović (2015) classify the motives of wellness tourists in Serbia as rejuvenation,

socialization, hedonism, obsession with health and beauty, relaxation and escape from routine. The research by Rančić, Blešić, Đorđević, and Bole (2016) revealed that the main motives for visiting wellness centers in Slovenia are the effortless activity (physical rest), the enhancement of the quality of life and the relaxation.

Rančić, Pavić and Mijatov (2014) also tried to understand the spa and wellness tourists' motivation during their visits to spa and wellness service centres in Slovenia. They concluded that the motives for visiting the wellness centres at the hotels in Slovenia are numerous and they depend a lot on the everyday healthy life style of the visitors. In addition, they depend on many other factors connected to the socio-demographic characteristics of the visitors, or on the characteristics of the wellness centres. Kamata and Misui (2015) divided Japanese spa tourists into two categories: weekday tourists and weekend tourists and found that the first have clearer motivations than the weekend tourists while both seek "soothing" when they visit spas. The research by Azman and Chan (2012) revealed that spa tourists' motivations are mainly attributed to the push factors, which are related to the psychological needs of the tourists including escape, rest and relaxation. Lim, Kim and Lee (2016) separated the visitors to a recreation wellness tourist attraction site in South Korea into first-time visitors and return visitors and examined the differences in their motivations. They discovered that first-time visitor motivations were composed of four factors: relaxation and rest, novelty, self-exploration, and accessibility, while the return visitor motivations were sightseeing and experience, convenience for touring, self-exploration, and accessibility. Moreover, Kucukusta, Pang and Chui (2013) examined the selection criteria that travellers use to gain insight into how demographic factors and travel characteristics affect their spa-related decisions. Their results revealed that relaxation, pampering, and beautification were the main reasons that people visited hotel spas, with the three most important major selection dimensions being therapists, price, and product and treatment types. Of the selection criteria studied, professional skills, product and service knowledge, sense of privacy, range of facilities, and product branding were the most important attributes. Finally, Global Wellness Institute (2014) identified two types of wellness travelers based to their wellness motivation: those who take a trip entirely for wellness purposes (primary wellness travelers) and those who engage in wellness activities as part of a trip (secondary wellness travelers). According to its data, secondary wellness travelers constitute the largest segment and account for 87% of wellness tourism trips and 84% of expenditures.

## 2. Methodology

As mentioned in the introductory section, the aim of this paper is to investigate and identify spa visitors' characteristics, motivations, preferences and perceptions, providing a better understanding of the main features of this type of tourists' behavior and expectations from a spa and wellness centre. Based on the above, the following research objectives were identified:

- To identify the demographic characteristics of the spa goers in Elounda region
- To identify the information sources used by spa goers about the spa visited
- To identify the level of previous spa experience among spa goers

- To identify how important wellness activities are for spa goers when they are or they are not on vacation
- To identify the critical factors in which spa goers pay attention when choosing a spa
- To identify spa goers' motives for visiting the spa
- To identify spa goers' level of satisfaction from the visit to the spa and their evaluation of the spa experience
- To identify possible differences among participants' answers based on their specific demographic characteristics

For the purposes of the research, a self completed structured questionnaire consisting of four sections and twenty questions, based on literature review, was designed. In the first section, spa guests were asked to provide some basic information about their vacations, such as the reasons for choosing the specific destination and the specific resort for their holidays, the information sources for the destination and the specific resort, the number of visits in the destination in the past, and their length of stay. The second section asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement (using a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") to five statements regarding their 'spa behaviour', specifically the importance of the existence of a spa as a major reason for choosing a destination or a resort, the importance of the word "spa" in the name of a resort as a pull factor, the importance of wellness activities on their holidays, and the visit in spas at their residence place. In addition, the second section asked respondents to indicate how important are several factors when choosing a spa, to a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from "unimportant" to "extremely important". Sixteen factors were identified in this question from literature review, namely facilities and equipment, location and environment, variety of services, quality of services, personnel behaviour and courtesy, staff knowledge, personnel hygiene, cleanliness and maintenance, competitive prices, decoration/ambience, reputation, personalised treatments, privacy, spa brand name, well known skincare brand, and finally reviews from other clients (e.g. on TripAdvisor). The third section focused on travellers' visit in the specific resort spa in Elounda region, and contained questions regarding the information sources about the spa, the reasons for visiting the spa (motives), the level of satisfaction from the visit to the spa (in ten attributes using a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from "poor" to "excellent"), and their experience in the spa compared to their expectations (using a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from "much worse" to "much better"). Regarding the reasons for visiting the spa, seven motivational factors were identified from previous studies, namely stress relief/relaxation, physical health improvement, mental health improvement, beauty services, anti-aging treatments, slimming, and nosiness. The last section contained questions about respondents' profile utilizing several demographic variables, i.e. gender, age, marital status, education, occupation, income and nationality. The questionnaire was originally prepared in Greek and then translated into English, German and French.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with 20 spa guests to test efficacy and clarity. Little modifications were then made based on their recommendations. The survey took place in a Resort Spa (a spa located within a resort providing professionally administered spa services, fitness and

wellness components) in Elounda, between June, 1<sup>st</sup> and August, 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Elounda is a small town on the northeast coast of the island of Crete, Greece. It skyrocketed in the late 60s when the first luxury 5-star hotel of Crete was built there. A building boom of luxury accommodation turned this small fishing village into the lively cosmopolitan resort it is today, the most luxurious in Greece, hosting some of the most prominent representatives of the world's social, political and economic life (Trihas, Zouganeli, & Antonaki, 2012). Elounda is home to some of the finest hotels and resorts in the world. In fact, it is the place with the highest concentration of Greece's five-star resorts. Elounda is characterized as 'the epitome of a luxurious holiday'. It should be also mentioned here that the resort where the survey conducted is a premium all inclusive, adults only resort. The manager of the selected spa was contacted to obtain permission to survey its customers. A total of 123 usable questionnaires were collected through personal interviews with spa customers that were approached at random, after they received wellness services in the spa. They were informed of the nature of the survey and were asked to complete the questionnaire. The surveys were generally conducted in the lobby area and each lasted about 10 to 15 minutes. The collected data were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Descriptive statistics were used to investigate spa guests' characteristics, motivations, expectations and perceptions. The T-test of the independent samples was applied in order to compare the significance of the answers between the male and the female respondents. Moreover, to investigate if there is a statistically significant connection between the dependant variables (the questions about the importance of various aspects when choosing a spa, the level of satisfaction from the visit to the spa and the evaluation of the spa experience) and the independent variables (the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, i.e. age, marital status, education level, occupation, annual income, and nationality), a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted.

### 3. Findings

The demographic and other characteristics of the 123 respondents in total, from the guests of a specific Resort Spa in Elounda, Crete, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of respondents

		<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Gender	Male	40	32,5
	Female	83	67,5
Age	18 to 24	15	12,2
	25 to 34	25	20,3

	35 to 44	12	9,8
	45 to 54	43	35,0
	55 and over	28	22,8
Marital Status	Single	27	22,0
	Engaged	10	8,1
	Married	80	65,0
	Divorced	6	4,9
Education Level	Basic	37	30,1
	Bachelor's degree	58	47,2
	Master / Doctorate	22	17,9
	Not Stated	6	4,9
Occupation	Employed	74	60,2
	Unemployed	3	2,4
	Business owner	30	24,4
	Retired	16	13,0
Annual Income	Under €15,000	10	8,1
	€15,000 to €30,000	22	17,9
	€30,001 to €50,000	48	39,0
	€50,001 or more	28	22,8
	Not Stated	15	12,2
Nationality	German	22	17,9
	British	83	67,5
	French	9	7,3
	Indian	2	1,6
	Belgian	4	3,3
	Dutch	3	2,4
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>123</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: elaboration by the authors



Female spa guests (67.5%) seem to be double than the male guests (32.5%). The majority of the guests were between 45-54 years old (35%) in comparison to the minority (9.8%) for ages 35-44. More than half of the respondents (65%) were married, followed by singles (22%), while divorced guests only reached a 4.9%. Regarding the educational level, most of the spa guests (47.2%) had graduated college, followed by 30.1% of guests with basic education. Only 17.9% were having Master's education while 4.9% did not state the level of education. Moreover, 60.2% of the spa guests were employed, 24.4% business owners and 13% retired. 2.4% was unemployed the moment that the research was taking place. Concerning about the annual income of the spa guests 39% of them stated that this was between €30,001 and 50,000 and 22.8% more than €50,001. Even 17.9% of guests earning €15,000-30,000 per year were visiting the spa, and that presumes that people from different economic status seem to need to enjoy spa facilities and treatments. In terms of the nationality, 67.5% of the respondents originated from the UK, 17.9% from Germany, 7.3% from France and 1.6%, 2.4% and 3.3% from India, Holland and Belgium respectively.

**Figure 1:** Elounda Area

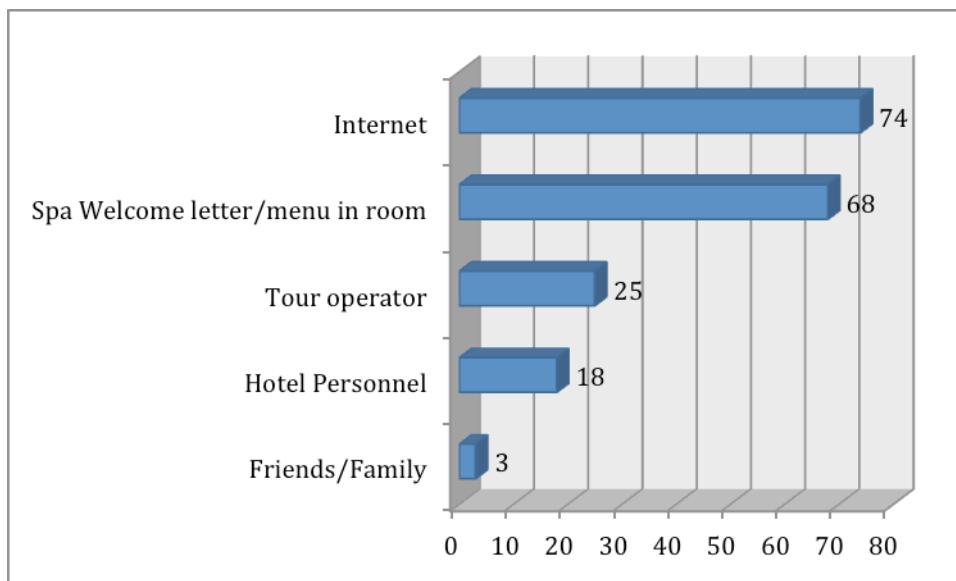


Source: Google maps

Initially, participants were asked to state the number of visits in Elounda in the past along with their length of stay in the destination. It turned out that for the majority of the participants (82.1%) that was their first visit in the destination. The rest of them were repeated visitors, since 13% visited Elounda for second time, 2.4% for third time, and 2.4% for umpteenth time. Regarding their length of stay in the destination, 72.4% of the respondents stated that they will stay for a week, 7.3% for 10 days, while a considerable 20.3% stated that they will stay for 2 weeks.

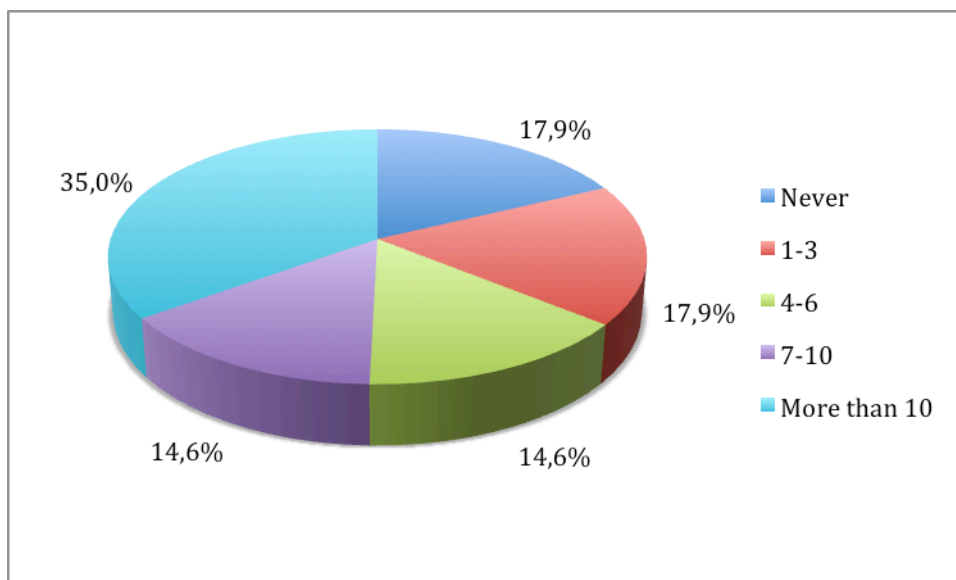
For the majority of the respondents (63.4%) the main reason for choosing Elounda for their holidays was the 'high standard hotels', followed by the 'climate, beaches and natural beauty' (43.9%), the 'services provided' (21.1%), the 'value for money' (19.5%), the 'reputation' of the destination (17.9%), the 'history and culture' of the area (13%), while 9.8% of the participants stated that they chose Elounda for their vacations randomly. These data reveal that for most of them there are multiple 'pull factors' that attract them in Elounda, and at the same time confirm the image of the area as a luxurious and cosmopolitan place. Moreover, the results of this research reveal that the visitors in Elounda used multiple information sources both for the destination and the resort they chose to spend the days of their vacation. Firstly, regarding the destination, the vast majority of the participants (74.8%) acquired their information via internet, while other sources also used, specifically tour operators (43.1%), 'word-of-mouth' by friends and family members (12.2%), personal experience (repeated visitors) with 8.1%, travel guides, magazines and TV (2.4%), and finally exhibitions (2.4%). Thereafter and on the information sources for the specific hotel, we do not observe significant differences since once again the majority of the participants (69.1%) found the necessary information on the web, while other information sources were also used such as tour operators (35.8%), personal experience (8.1%) and recommendations from friends and family (2.4%).

The majority of the guests that visited the spa (60.1%) had been informed about the spa through the internet. Next in the list was the welcome letter and voucher that the guests receive upon their arrival in the Resort, so 55.3% of the guests noted that they heard about the spa through this promotional activity. Tour operators informed only 20.3% of the guests to visit the spa and the information about the spa from hotel personnel reached only the 14.6% of the guests. Finally, 3 guests (2.4%) stated that they had heard about the spa from their friends or family members (word-of-mouth).



**Figure 2:** Information sources about spa visited  
Source: elaboration by the authors

35% of the guests that received a treatment stated that they had visited a spa for more than 10 times in the past, in contrast with all the other possible answers given, varying from never to 10 times where the average answers were between 14.6-17.9%. We conclude that the majority of the respondents are experienced and regular spa-goers.



**Figure 3:** Number of times visited a spa in the past  
Source: elaboration by the authors

In the following part of the research the participants were asked to indicate in a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on how important wellness activities are when they are on vacation. The mean for all the 5 aspects were all very close, with the respondents being from neutral to positive (Table 2). The majority of the guests agreed that the word “spa” in the name of a Resort influences them positively in order to

choose the specific hotel for their holidays, and generally agreed that the existence of the spa in the resort was quite a major reason why they chose this resort for their holidays. The same does not seem to apply also for the reasons to choose Elounda for their holidays where their perceptions are more neutral. The opinions are also dichotomous and mainly neutral when they asked if wellness activities are more interesting for them than other type of activities when they are on holidays, while more than half of the respondents (55.3%) agree or strongly agree that they are visiting spas even at their residence place.

**Table 2:** Spa guests' level of agreement on various statements regarding spa and wellness tourism

	Strongly Disagree		Neither Agree or Disagree		Strongly agree	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
The existence of the spa in the region was a major reason to choose Elounda for my vacation	8,1	12,2	52,0	22,8	4,9	3,04	0,936
The existence of the spa in the hotel was a major reason to choose the specific resort for my vacation	0,0	17,9	42,3	35,0	4,9	3,27	0,811
The word "spa" in the name of a resort influences me positively to choose this hotel for my holidays	0,0	12,2	47,2	30,9	9,8	3,38	0,825
Wellness activities are more interesting to me than any other type of activities when I am on holidays	2,4	22,0	44,7	21,1	9,8	3,14	0,952
I am visiting Spas even at my residence place (when not on holidays)	9,8	15,4	19,5	45,5	9,8	3,30	1,145

Source: elaboration by the authors

Application of ANOVA to investigate the significant effects of the demographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, marital status, education, occupation, income, nationality) on their ratings of the five aspects on how important wellness activities are when they are on vacation (see Table 2), revealed some statistically significant effects in a number of cases. Namely, *age* appeared to have some influence on respondents' perceptions about 'the existence of the spa in the region was a major reason to choose Elounda for my vacation' ( $p=0.003$ ). The same goes for *education level*

( $p=0.000$ ), *occupation* ( $p=0.002$ ), *annual income* ( $p=0.001$ ) and *nationality* ( $p=0.012$ ). The age groups "35 to 44" and "55 and over", the holders of Master/PhD, the employed or retired persons, with income 30,000 Euro or more, the Germans and the Dutch tend to disagree declaring that the existence of the spa in the region was not a major reason to choose Elounda for their vacation. Regarding the second aspect about 'the existence of the spa in the hotel was a major reason to choose the specific Resort for my vacation' some statistically significant effects are also revealed for *education level* ( $p=0.002$ ), *occupation* ( $p=0.008$ ) and *nationality* ( $p=0.001$ ). The unemployed persons, the persons with the lower income and the Dutch seem to disagree with this statement. Continuing with the third aspect 'The word "spa" in the name of a resort influences me positively to choose this hotel for my holidays', the statistically significant effects concern *education level* ( $p=0.023$ ) and *nationality* ( $p=0.033$ ). The guests with basic education or Master/PhD and once more the Dutch appear to be more negative and disagree. *Nationality* seems to influence respondents' perceptions regarding the fourth aspect ( $p=0.001$ ) but also the fifth aspect ( $p=0.000$ ) along in this case with *age* ( $p=0.048$ ), *marital status* ( $p=0.024$ ), *education level* ( $p=0.000$ ), *occupation* ( $p=0.001$ ) and *annual income* ( $p=0.000$ ). Generally, Dutch guests appear to disagree or strongly disagree with the total of the statements about wellness activities. However, the latter is not to be trusted because of the low representation of Dutch people in the sample (only 3 persons).

**Table 3.** Importance of various aspects when choosing a spa

	Unimportant				Extremely important	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Facilities and equipment	0,0	2,4	33,3	22,8	41,5	4,03	0,923
Location and environment	2,4	2,4	28,5	39,8	26,8	3,86	0,926
Variety of services	0,0	1,6	24,4	39,8	34,1	4,07	0,807
Quality of services	0,0	2,4	8,1	28,5	61,0	4,48	0,750
Personnel behavior and courtesy	0,0	2,4	8,1	26,0	63,4	4,50	0,751
Staff knowledge	0,0	1,6	8,9	21,1	68,3	4,56	0,726
Personnel hygiene	0,0	2,4	9,8	17,1	70,7	4,56	0,770
Cleanliness and maintenance	0,0	0,0	9,8	14,6	75,6	4,66	0,651
Competitive prices	0,0	0,0	15,4	57,7	26,8	4,11	0,643

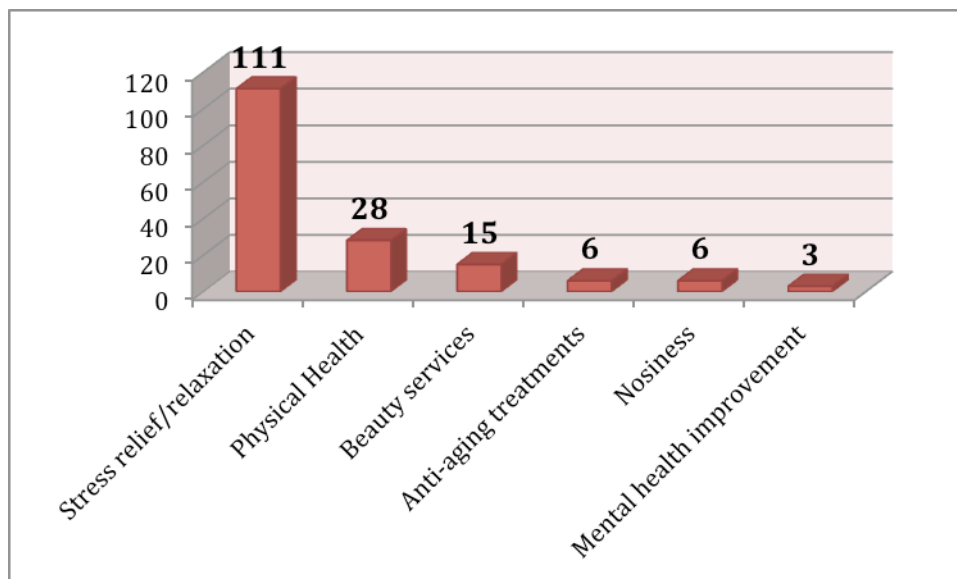
Decoration/Ambience	0,0	2,4	13,8	44,7	39,0	4,20	0,768
Reputation	0,0	3,3	37,4	39,8	19,5	3,76	0,803
Personalized treatments	0,0	8,1	35,0	27,6	29,3	3,78	0,963
Privacy	2,4	3,3	13,0	39,8	41,5	4,15	0,938
Spa Brand Name	7,3	23,6	49,6	17,1	2,4	2,84	0,881
Well known skincare brand	7,3	16,3	52,0	19,5	4,9	2,98	0,923
Reviews (e.g. TripAdvisor)	2,4	5,7	33,3	41,5	17,1	3,65	0,914

Source: elaboration by the authors

Subsequently, the participants were asked to rate the importance of various factors that influence them when choosing a spa. Most of the aspects were rated high, with greater importance to be given to the cleanliness and the maintenance of a spa (Mean=4.66). Secondly, the participants of the research rated the staff knowledge and hygiene as extremely important (Mean=4.56), followed by the personnel behavior and courtesy (Mean=4.50). Interestingly the fact that next in their preferences was the quality of services (Mean=4.48) shows clearly that for the spa guests most important is the ambience of a spa and the staff's grooming standards than the treatment they will receive. Aspects as the spa's decoration, privacy, competitive prices, variety of services and facilities were rated high as well. Surprisingly the reviews in sites such as TripAdvisor are not as important for the spa guests (Mean=3.65). Less interest is given from the spa guests about the notability of the skincare brand that a spa is using (Mean=2.98) and even less in the spa brand name (Mean=2.84).

Moreover, some significant effects ( $p < 0.05$ ) were detected concerning the respondents' evaluation of various factors when choosing a spa (Table 3). Specifically, gender appeared to influence respondents' perceptions about the importance of 'facilities and equipment' ( $p = 0.030$ ), 'quality of services' ( $p = 0.003$ ), 'personnel behavior and courtesy' ( $p = 0.003$ ), 'staff knowledge' ( $p = 0.005$ ), 'competitive prices' ( $p = 0.018$ ), 'privacy' ( $p = 0.001$ ), 'spa brand name' ( $p = 0.011$ ), and 'reviews' ( $p = 0.001$ ). The only factors that are evaluated higher from men – in comparison with women – are 'cleanliness and maintenance', 'spa brand name' and 'reviews'. Moreover, *age* seems to affect respondents' perceptions on the importance of 'facilities and equipment' ( $p = 0.014$ ), 'variety of services' ( $p = 0.000$ ), 'quality of services' ( $p = 0.001$ ), 'personnel hygiene' ( $p = 0.008$ ), 'cleanliness and maintenance' ( $p = 0.007$ ), 'competitive prices' ( $p = 0.000$ ), 'decoration/ambience' ( $p = 0.001$ ), 'personalized treatments' ( $p = 0.000$ ), 'privacy' ( $p = 0.000$ ), 'spa brand name' ( $p = 0.001$ ), 'well known skincare brand' ( $p = 0.001$ ) and 'reviews' ( $p = 0.022$ ). The age group '35 to 44' appears to consider as very important or extremely important the above factors when selecting a spa. The *marital status* is another factor that influence respondents' feelings about the importance of 'location and environment' ( $p = 0.000$ ), 'competitive prices' ( $p = 0.046$ ), and 'reviews' ( $p = 0.000$ ). These factors are not very important for engaged people when they choose a spa.

Next, some significant effects were detected concerning the effect of *education level* in the respondents' perceptions about the importance of 'privacy' ( $p=0.002$ ), and the effect of *occupation* in the perceptions for 'cleanliness and maintenance' ( $p=0.028$ ), 'competitive prices' ( $p=0.000$ ), 'decoration/ambience' ( $p=0.000$ ), 'personalized treatments' ( $p=0.048$ ), 'privacy' ( $p=0.039$ ), and 'spa brand name' ( $p=0.032$ ). Finally, *income* and *nationality* seems to influence the perceptions about the importance of the most factors cited, revealing some more statistically significant effects.



**Figure 4:** Reasons for visiting the spa  
Source: elaboration by the authors

Significant percentage of guests that reaches 90.2% mentioned that the main reason for visiting the spa is for stress relief/relaxation. The other reasons mentioned are physical health improvement (22.7%), followed by beauty treatments (12.2%), anti-aging treatments (4.9%), nosiness (4.9%), and finally mental health improvement with just 2.4%.

**Table 4:** Level of satisfaction from the visit to the spa

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Facilities and equipment	0,0	0,0	16,3	29,3	54,5	4,38	0,752
Variety of services provided	0,0	0,0	4,9	30,9	64,2	4,59	0,584
Personnel behavior and courtesy	0,0	0,0	0,0	26,0	74,0	4,74	0,441
Staff hygiene	0,0	0,0	0,0	21,1	78,9	4,79	0,410

Cleanliness	0,0	0,0	8,9	14,6	76,4	4,67	0,634
Arrival experience	0,0	0,0	0,0	30,9	69,1	4,69	0,464
Quality of services provided	0,0	0,0	3,3	30,1	66,7	4,63	0,547
Knowledge of staff	0,0	0,0	5,7	27,6	66,7	4,61	0,596
Cost	4,1	11,4	30,1	35,0	19,5	3,54	1,058
Decoration/ambience	0,0	0,0	16,3	29,3	54,5	4,38	0,752

Source: elaboration by the authors

Generally, the guests that visited the specific Resort Spa and participated in the research were satisfied almost to an excellent level. The only aspect that was rated in a lower level was the cost of the treatments (Mean=3.54). Nevertheless, the guests were extremely satisfied with the hygiene of the staff (Mean=4.79) and their courtesy (Mean=4.74). Very high in their rating was the arrival experience (Mean=4.69) and the cleanliness (Mean=4.67), and then the quality of the services (Mean=4.63). High rating had also the knowledge of the staff (Mean=4.61), then the variety of the services (Mean=4.59) and finally the facilities, equipment and decoration (Mean=4.38).

Regarding the level of satisfaction from the visit to the spa, some significant effects ( $p < 0.05$ ) were also detected. Specifically, the younger group (18 to 24) and the older group (55 and over) of participants, the engaged people with a bachelor's degree, the unemployed people with an income of less than €15,000 (in that case besides the 'cost' factor) and the French with the British customers tend to be more satisfied with the majority of the satisfaction factors listed in Table 4.

**Table 5:** Evaluation of the spa experience

	Much worse		About the same		Much better	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Did your spa experience meet your expectations?	0,0	0,0	32,5	22,8	44,7	4,12	0,874
Compared to similarly priced spas how would you rate this spa?	0,0	0,0	51,2	26,8	22,0	3,71	0,807

Source: elaboration by the authors

On the one hand most of the guests declared that the specific spa experience met their expectations (Mean=4.12) but on the other hand compared to similarly priced spas they would rate it about the same (Mean=3.71). The two aspects in the above Table were rated higher by female, younger, single, unemployed people with an income of less than €15,000, mainly from France and Belgium.



## Discussion and Conclusion

The new millennium has seen the global spa industry emerge as a melting pot for a whole host of products and services that enhance health and well-being (Cohen, 2008). In this context, spa and wellness tourism is a significant niche in the contemporary tourism industry. It is not a new phenomenon and has its origins in the traditions of tourism as offering escape, rejuvenation, health and well-being (Tresidder, 2011). As more and more people aim to improve their quality of life and tourists increasingly seek to incorporate wellness into their trips, the spa industry will continue to benefit and grow. This paper has been written to provide further consideration for spa managers and hoteliers, to contribute to the body of knowledge on spa-goers' behavior and to stimulate further research in the field.

The results of the study revealed some interesting information about spa-goers' characteristics and behaviour. Firstly, the study examines the role of socio-demographic variables as determinants of being a 'spa tourist'. Spa guests surveyed belong to various socio-demographic groups, but in their majority are females, aged 45-54 years, married, employed, bachelor's degree holders, with an annual income between €30,001 and €50,000. These data confirm the findings of previous studies about spa guests' socio-demographic characteristics. For example, although an emerging male market within the spa industry is recognised by some researchers (Keri, Ottenbacher, & Harrington, 2007; Sherman, Clemenz, & Phillip, 2007; Tsai, Su, & Fong, 2007), the majority of them agree that still mainly women are involved in wellness activities as they have always been far more interested in physical appearance, weight issues, make-up, and hair care than men (Smith & Puczko, 2009). Furthermore, previous studies have shown that spas attract individuals across a broad spectrum of income levels, as the product characteristics are dependent on quality over price (Keri, Ottenbacher, & Harrington, 2007).

Most of the respondents can be described as experienced and regular spa-goers as approximately eight out of ten have visited a spa at least once in the past. This sounds logical if we consider that other researchers believe that those who have visited spas are most likely to revisit spas. For example, Kim, Kim, Huh, and Knutson (2010) examined consumers' behavioural intention to spa visiting. Their results indicated that past experience appeared to be a significant predictor to behavioural intention to spa visiting. Moreover, more than half of the respondents agree or strongly agree that they are visiting spas even at their residence place. The latter confirms the findings of Monteson and Singer (2004) who argue that today's resort spa-goers are increasingly integrating 'spa life' in their day-to-day life at home, doing regular exercise and recreational sports, and pampering themselves with massages, facials, manicures and pedicures. On the other hand, Azman and Chan (2012), argue that although some tourists might not be regular spa goers at their home countries (generally due to time and cost constraint and the nature of their works), many of them would have spa treatments during holiday which commonly related to relaxation purposes, and/or other socio-psychological factors. The majority of the respondents appear neutral to positive when they asked if the existence of the spa was a major reason to choose the specific destination and resort for their holidays. In addition, an interesting finding of

this study is that it seems that the word “spa” in the name of a resort influences tourists positively in order to choose the specific resort for their holidays. This is something new, not found in previous studies. For example, while there are studies that explore the importance of the existence of a spa facility in luxury hotels as a competitive advantage, and which conclude that a luxury hotel will be at a severe disadvantage if it has no wellness activities to offer (Heyes, Beard, & Gehrels, 2015), there were no evidence – until now – about the word spa in the name of a resort as a pull factor.

An important objective of this study was to identify the critical factors that spa goers take into account when choosing a spa. Towards that direction, a number of such factors are recognized, with the top-five of them to be cleanliness and maintenance of a spa, staff knowledge, staff hygiene, personnel behavior and courtesy, and the quality of services. On the other hand, less interest is given from spa guests in the notability of the skincare brand that a spa is using, in the spa brand name, and surprisingly in the reviews of previous customers on travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Booking.com, etc.), in spite of the fact that previous studies have highlighted the growing importance of online travel reviews in travel-related decisions (see Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Furthermore, although the importance of these factors confirm the results of previous studies, the low rating of spa brand name and the well known skincare brand contradict the findings of other studies, in which branded spa products are preferred by customers (see Kucukusta & Guillet, 2014). Moving to spa goers' motives, the results showed that the main reason for visiting the spa is for stress relief/relaxation, followed by physical health improvement and beauty treatments. These results also confirm the results of previous studies. Especially relaxation and stress reduction is found in many studies as a main reason that people visited spas (Azman, & Chan, 2012; Chen, Chang, & Wu, 2013; Chen, Prebensen, & Huan, 2008; Keri, Ottenbacher, & Harrington, 2007; Kucukusta, Pang, & Chui, 2013; Mak, Wong, & Chung, 2009; Tsai, Suh, & Fong, 2007; Voigt, Brown, & Howat, 2011) and as the core emotion in spa context that leads to satisfaction (Loureiro, Almeida, & Rita, 2013).

Significant implications of this study are recognized for spa managers and academics. Firstly, the research findings should be valuable in several ways to hotel and spa managers. Spa managers are facing an increasing pressure to transform hotel spas into profit generating centres (Heyes, Beard, & Gehrels, 2015; Hodari, Waldthausen, & Sturmanb, 2014). With a growing number of travellers enjoying spa experiences and wellness activities, it is vital that resorts, hotels and spa centres understand their preferences. Despite the difficulty of homogenizing the wellness tourist as a consumer, it is important to the management of tourism to understand the way in which consumers make decisions and consume spa and wellness activities while appreciating the diversity of demand, particularly for the marketing of wellness products and services where an understanding of tourist consumption and consumer behavior is essential (Heitmann, 2011). Without a better understanding of spa-goers, spas may end up losing market share to competitors (Guillet & Kucukusta, 2016). An examination of the selection criteria used by tourists when choosing spas should provide hoteliers and spa managers with the information needed to create effective promotional campaigns and business strategies. In order to survive on the limited market where global competition depends on the accurate strategies for spa tourism development, those strategies must be based on the desires and demands of customers (Dimitrovski

& Todorović, 2015). In this context, this paper provides useful information to spa managers about their customers' motives, their selection criteria, and their preferences regarding spa and wellness services. Spa managers could exploit this information to develop personalized wellness services for their clients, enhancing their satisfaction and loyalty. They will succeed it by paying attention to the key attributes that eventually contribute to a more remarkable spa experience which will lead to enhanced guest satisfaction. Lo, Wu and Tsai (2015) argue that it is important for a spa to deliver quality services so that customers attain positive emotions, as this will encourage them to seek the same positive experience in the future. For example, spa establishments should be designed in a way that promotes relaxation as this is generally the main motivator for the tourists to visit spas. Moreover, some interesting marketing implications arose from the analysis of the collected questionnaires that should help spa managers to develop appropriate marketing strategies in spa context. For example, managers in hotels and resorts that have spa facilities should use the word "spa" in the name of their hotels, as it could attract more customers. Additionally, they should take advantage of internet for promotion of their spa facilities – as it is recognized as the number one information source for spa goers – along with other more traditional promotional methods, such as welcome letters and tour operators. Other researchers also agree that by far the most common source for information for spa-goers are websites (see Joppe, 2010). Consequently, besides the actual spa presentation, of great importance is also the creation of an attractive image of the spa in resort's website and brochures. Apart from the business interest aroused by the global growth of the spa and wellness market, an academic interest has also been occurred, although this topic has been largely overlooked in hospitality literature. This paper could be useful for academics interested in the topics of consumer behavior, and also special forms of tourism. The study of motivation is being widely used in understanding of the human behavior and as a subject is an integral part of the study of consumer behavior in tourism (Rančić, Pavić, & Mijatov, 2014).

There are some limitations to this study. As mentioned before in the Methodology Section, the survey conducted in a specific Resort Spa in Elounda. The resort is a premium all inclusive, adults only resort. This means that its customers have specific characteristics that might differentiate them from customers of other resorts and spas in the area, i.e. age, nationality – 45% of resort's clientele are British – marital status (mainly couples), etc. Previous studies have shown that spa goers' profiles are likely to differ – sometimes radically – according to which countries they come from (Smith & Puczko, 2009). Moreover, a convenience sampling method was used in the data collection stage, while the sample size is relatively small. Therefore, the results might not reflect the market as a whole and may not be applicable to customers of other types of spa in Elounda or to spa customers in other parts of Crete as their experiences may be different. Future studies should focus more on spa and wellness market segmentation to better understand this type of tourists and the underlying dimensions of their preferences.

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