

Aspects on the perception of young people regarding balneotherapy tourism in Romania

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Abstract. *The delimitation of perceptions regarding balneotherapy destinations is a defining process for shaping their positioning in consumers' minds. Therefore, creating how balneotherapy tourism products specific activities are perceived by consumers and the relationship that they have reported to the sensations that assemble the touristic experience is essential in creating a tourism image. In this sense, a quantitative marketing research was conducted on a sample of 573 young people undergoing university studies in order to know their perception regarding balneotherapy resorts in Romania, analyzing the importance and particularities of each sensation in relation to balneotherapy resorts felt by respondents that differentiate the balneotherapy experience from other touristic experiences.*

Keywords: perceptions; sensory marketing in tourism; balneotherapy destination.

JEL Classification: M31.

REL Classification: 14G.

Introduction

As information technology develops, altogether with man's isolation from nature, the importance of tourism products focusing on health, meeting global, aggregate needs by extending the concept of health to achieving wellbeing is more obvious in terms of the *body-mind-spirit* relationship (adaptation according to Dunn, 1959, quoted in Smith, Puczko, 2009). Wellbeing, superior to the state of happiness, means "to have a clear direction to follow in life, a sense of belonging, a coherent and positive vision on life and a sense of affiliation" (Hamilton – Wellness Manifesto, 2008, cited in Smith, Puczko, 2009), and is increasingly common in the literature, also integrating other needs found on different levels on Maslow's pyramid. Given the complexity of health tourism with its types, it can be said that it has become a type of tourism of "senses".

As the new activities by which "achieving wellbeing" materializes represent "drivers" of tourism products (in the case of Romania, balneotherapy activities represent their essence) that are based on new sensations for consumers, in order to effectively plan destinations in terms of marketing, more detailed researches are required firstly on all the senses by which it is perceived by potential tourists.

Conceptual framework

Achieving wellbeing involves "what is good for a person, but also the extent to which a person's life goes well" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2007), requiring "the solving" of a unique complex of physical, mental and spiritual conditions for each consumer. Thus, the need for tourism service customization occurs at a medical level by establishing a diagnosis and a specific treatment regimen that meets the (health) need of consumers, but also at a tourist level by choosing those services that match the preferences and desires of consumers and that distinguish between consumption and experience, unlike ordinary consumption (with no obligation to be "adapted" or "customized"). Touristic experience causes a high degree of "closeness" to the consumer, its components being best "absorbed" by the consumer by transforming them into sensations, and then into well-defined consumer perceptions, and contributes to the expected or desired state of spirit, emphasizing, in this way, the emotional side of consumption.

Sensory marketing focuses on the impact of the five senses on consumer experience (Giboreau, Body, 2007, p. 8). Regardless of the objectives (e.g., targeting new markets by knowing the sensations that "meet" certain categories of consumers; development of new products by exploring and capitalizing the stimuli that imprint consumer with a sensation or coherent complex of

desired/expected sensations; repositioning existing products by emphasizing, sharing or updating those sensations which are found to be in accordance with the needs of consumers etc.), the starting point in sensory marketing, in the context of touristic experience, is the prior analysis of sensory properties (regarding tourists' contact with the destination by specifying its resources, but also tourism products and/or services) to group or regroup them in a structure consistent with the levels of the product that adds value.

Therefore, given the high degree of sophistication of consumer needs, tourism products should contain a significant number of "sensory contact points" with the consumer, involving all the senses for a complex touristic experience. For example, to create a complex visual experience, marketers should consider and analyze permanently the color palette used, the brightness, transparency, reflections, motives, area, volume and textures used; also controlling each dimension should be calibrated depending on the product concept or integrated product, based on the consumer's needs and/or desires and, possibly, on competing products. Regarding hearing, the analysis should focus on intensity, pitch, timbre and vibration of sound to identify new opportunities to improve the product and at the same time obtain a consistent experience (by harmonizing sensations). Tourism products can target consumers through the sense of touch, creating sensations related to touch, motion, thermal condition or pain thresholds, which are both important for treatment services, and for wellness and relaxation ones. Smell, characterized by quality, intensity, emotional valence and duration also needs to be studied, explained, exploited and refined with taste (through its four facets: bitter, sour, salty and sweet taste). The harmonization of the sensations belonging to the five senses consists of expressing and explaining the idea of "health by all means" (at destination level), which acts as an umbrella conceptor interpretation filter to create perception, since it includes both value judgments, and evocative and symbolic functions (Giboreau, Body, 2007, p. 63). Since satisfaction – an element highly studied by marketing specialists – is a subjective phenomenon, although it is subjected to an objective determinism (adaptation according to Pop et al., 2008, p. 77), the more emphasis is placed on the influence of the senses, by the approach that transcends the classical framework of the five senses, and more, by allowing the creation of some tourism products starting right from the "activities [...] encompassed within the philosophy of the six senses" – *six senses* (Stăncioiu et al., 2013, p. 130), by this ensuring a strong emotional bond with the consumer.

While sensations can be described using language – their "objective" description "framework", perceptions are a product of consumer interpretation based on personal, marketing (related to the product), situational factors or related to previous experiences (Giboreau, Body, 2007, p. 61), which have a strong

subjective character, and, therefore, are more difficult to quantify. Thus, unique relationships can be created that can render different perceptions of the same sensations. The importance of studying the relationship between sensation and perception is especially important for complex balneotherapy tourism products, such as those in Romania, whose symbolic universe is extremely comprehensive, their complexity making it difficult to achieve the multisensory balance, a task essentially left in the area of expertise of marketing, namely the creation of new balneotherapy products.

Methodological framework

Starting from the importance of engaging the five senses in the decision to purchase a tourism product (especially, balneotherapy products) and then in consumer satisfaction, it was considered necessary to conduct a quantitative marketing research with the aim of knowing youth perception on balneotherapy resorts. The research objectives refer to the importance and particularities of each sense in relation to balneotherapy resorts felt by respondents contributing to the mental delineation of the balneotherapy experience from touristic experiences based on other types of tourism.

The research was conducted between November 2012 – April 2013, on a sample of 573 persons undergoing university studies⁽¹⁾, being composed of: people aged 18-24 (90.9%), people aged 25-39 years (8.2%), and people aged 40-50 (0.9%). Of the respondents, 29.4% are males, and 70.6% are females. In terms of geographical distribution, 42.2% of respondents are residents of Bucharest City, 32.8% come from Muntenia, 10.8% – Moldova, 2.4% – Dobrogea, 1.2% – Transylvania and 0.5% – Banat-Crișana. Most respondents have incomes of less than 1,000 lei (49.3%), 39.6% of them having incomes between 1,000-2,000 lei, 5.3% - 2000-3000 lei and 5.8% - above 3,000 lei.

Research results

To analyze the main sensory properties of balneotherapy destinations it is necessary to know the reasons for visiting them, as some tourism services that may benefit potential consumers are addressed to certain market segments (e.g., recovery, treatment, prevention, relaxation services etc.), whose generic features aim specific sensations that underlie the formation of certain perceptions (e.g., the sun bath, a treatment service for allergic asthma or tracheo-bronchitis is a factor stimulating the sense of touch etc.). Most respondents who had visited a balneotherapy resort (380 of the respondents) – 56% – aimed to relax, followed by rest (13%) and prevent (12%) – Figure 1.

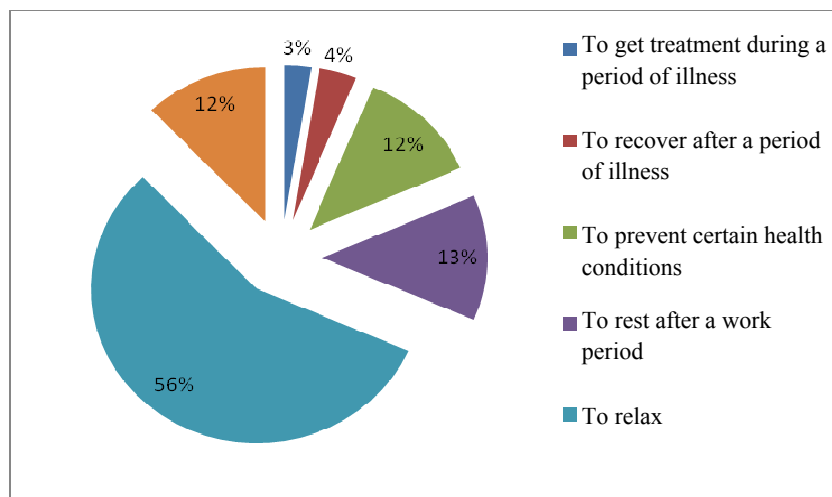


Figure 1. *Reasons for visiting balneotherapy resorts*

In fact, after visiting as many new places as possible (37% of respondents), the main purpose when choosing a tourism destination is represented by rest and recreation (35.4%), and then by relaxation (12.2%) – Table 1, all being the main reasons why young people visited so far balneotherapy resorts in Romania, which emphasizes the importance of balneotherapy tourism products.

Table 1. *The main purpose when choosing a tourism destination*

% of column total	
Visiting as many new places as possible	37.8
Rest and recreation	35.4
Relaxation	12.2
Entertainment	6.7
Knowledge	6.0
Pursuit of extreme sports activities	1.5
Other reason	0.4

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors.

Since all balneotherapy resorts in Romania allow spending the vacations in all seasons, most of them being generally permanent resorts, the vacation period is important to determine the seasonal factors that make and differentiate the touristic experience. Sensory marketing specialists are particularly interested in the specificity of natural factors in relation to the change of seasons (e.g., air temperature, the colors of the natural environment etc.), and then on their influence degree on the main quantitative and qualitative indicators (e.g., the

number of tourists visiting a particular destination during the period studied, the average length of stay, the degree of recovery etc.). The fact that 91% of respondents take time off between July and September (Figure 2) must provide those interested in destination sensory marketing with the necessary basis to perform a “sensory audit” of the destination for this period, determining and capitalizing the sensory stimuli with which potential consumers can get in touch and how they can help to meet their needs in terms of travel motivation. However, to capitalize the tourism potential of balneotherapy resorts it is necessary to emphasize the main seasonal sensory stimuli that can act on potential consumers in other periods, too (October to December, January to March – 1%). This action is the basis for building competitive advantage that resorts may hold in relation to other tourism destinations, whose seasonal character does not allow spending vacations in this period.

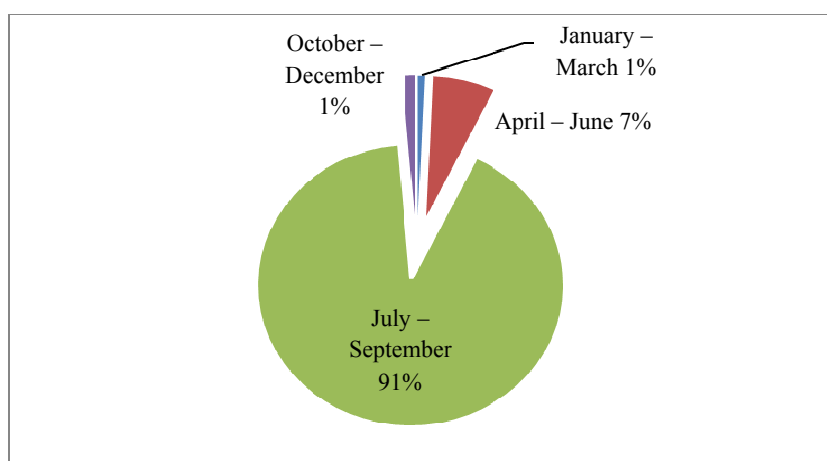


Figure 2. *Period of vacations*

To complement the “universe of the senses” from the perspective of touristic experiences as complex as possible (multiple types of tourism), it was considered important to determine the main types of tourism that can be practiced alongside balneotherapy tourism from the perspective of the respondents. Mountain tourism (36%) and cultural tourism (24%) followed by ecotourism (13%) were the main types of tourism associated with balneotherapy tourism, the sensory stimuli to which consumers may be subjected when practicing activities related to associated types of tourism “enriching” in this way the sensory experience and bringing added value to the touristic experience with effects on obtaining satisfaction.

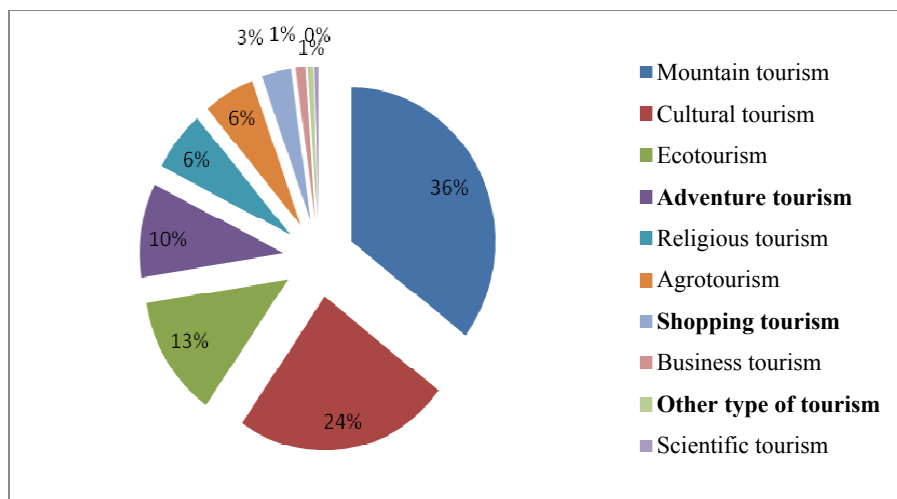


Figure 3. *The most appropriate type of tourism to be practiced alongside balneotherapy tourism*

The contribution of the types of tourism related to balneotherapy tourism is important considering the “universe of sensations” making up a balneotherapy touristic experience; it can be supplemented with auxiliary activities that stimulate the other senses than those perceived by consumers in the balneotherapy experience, or that emphasize the perception of senses also found in the sensory balneotherapy experience. Mountain tourism (Figure 4) is a type of tourism that involves, from the respondents’ view, all the senses (64%) and is considered, at the same time, to be most suitable for balneotherapy tourism. In this case, the introduction of mountain tourism specific activities or merging them with balneotherapy activities can be a competitive advantage in sensory marketing strategy for balneotherapy tourism, complementing the balneotherapy touristic experience by catalyzing the perception of senses stimulated by balneotherapy experiences or by “enriching” and diversifying them with mountain activities (e.g., practicing sport activities at Băile Herculane to supplement balneotherapy treatments). Seaside tourism (44.5%) and adventure tourism (35.3%), in the view of respondents, are largely types of tourism involving all the senses, before balneotherapy tourism. Activities that they involve can be used in a sensory marketing strategy to create developed balneotherapy products (e.g., for a better “coverage” of the senses, practicing beauty/wellness services in seaside resorts etc.).

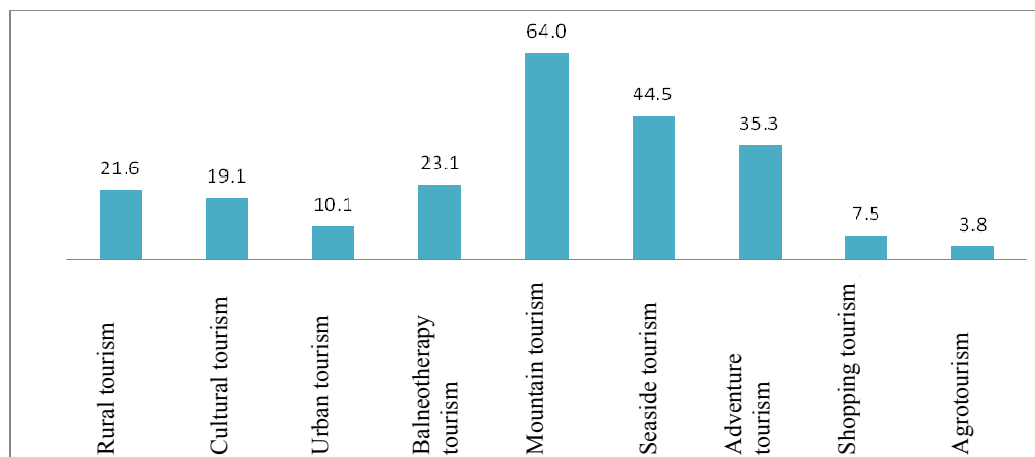


Figure 4. The type of tourism which, from the respondents' view, involves the five senses

Another possibility for practicing balneotherapy tourism can be represented by the “alternative” situation to spend time in another type of destination (rural, mountain, seaside, urban etc.). Respondents consider balneotherapy tourism a choice in relation to a rural destination (61.3% would choose a balneotherapy destination compared to a rural destination). However, mountain and seaside destinations (considered by respondents as those that best involve all five senses) would be selected by respondents if they would have to choose between each of them and a balneotherapy resort. Hence, the need for a sensory profile of tourism resorts, balneotherapy, mountain and seaside alike, for the creation of a well-defined image, of the possibilities related to experiences that generate desired/expected sensations.

Table 2. The possibility to choose a balneotherapy destination compared to another type of tourism destination – % –

Balneotherapy destination	61.3	38.7	Rural destination
Balneotherapy destination	4.4	95.6	Seaside destination
Balneotherapy destination	4.4	95.6	Mountain destination
Balneotherapy destination	44	56	Urban destination

In order to shape, from the perspective of the respondents, a balneotherapy identity based on the senses, it was considered necessary to emphasize the differentiation of balneotherapy resorts; therefore, the main differentiating factor of balneotherapy resorts is that of taste in terms of foods and mineral waters (achieving a score of 5.01 on a semantic differential type scale with six gradations) – Figure 5, the smell also being a sensory element of differentiation of balneotherapy resorts (4.26). In an analytical approach in which the knowledge of

sensory properties of products and services that are part of the tourism product prevails, the sensory marketing strategy can start from the two predominantly stimulated senses (taste and smell) to define the constituent elements of balneotherapy tourism products.

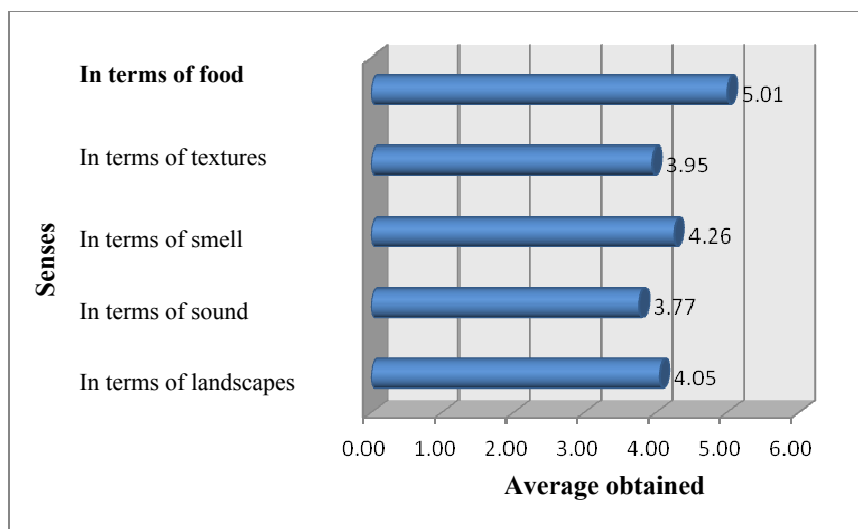


Figure 5. *Differentiation of the balneotherapy destination from other types of destinations in terms of the five senses*

In order to maximize the effects of stimuli, determining the sensory particularities of balneotherapy destinations must be related to how the different senses are “activated” or “used” to achieve wellbeing. Thus, sight (Figure 6) is considered by respondents as a sense contributing to the greatest extent to wellbeing during a vacation (with an average score of 5.41 on a semantic differential type scale with six gradations) followed by smell (4.86) and taste (4.77). The factors that stimulate the senses which differentiate balneotherapy resorts are mainly those who also “act” in order to achieve wellbeing, according to the respondents’ answers.

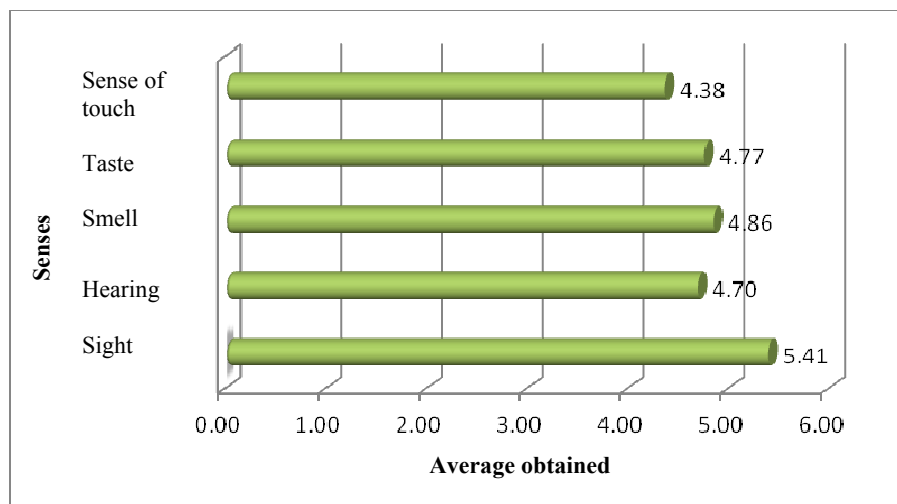


Figure 6. *The contribution of the five senses to the wellbeing that respondents want to achieve on vacations*

Seasons give specificity to sensations obtained especially based on activities in nature; therefore, perceiving balneotherapy vacations as suitable for a particular season automatically projects in a consumer's mind a particular set of activities and, therefore, a certain set of "expected" sensations. Summer (Figure7) is rated at 40.1% as the best season for a balneotherapy vacation, followed by autumn (20.6%); so it is necessary to determine the activities required/preferred (e.g., conducting field treatments), the set of sensations they involve (e.g., the sun's heat action during field treatments framed in stimulating the sense of touch), and the position of potential consumers to these sensations. It is also necessary to communicate the benefit of balneotherapy tourism that it can be practiced in all seasons, delimiting the sensory components associated with each of them (the average score for the statement that seasons count for balneotherapy tourism being 4.12 on a scale of 1 to 5).

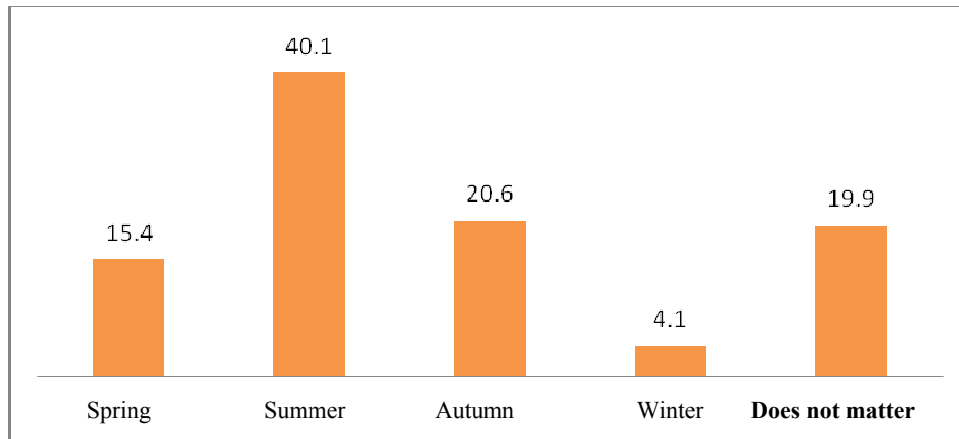


Figure 7. Seasons associated with a vacation in balneotherapy destinations

Taste (Figure 8), considered the sense through which balneotherapy tourism can be significantly differentiated, is analyzed in the research by the taste of food in balneotherapy resorts, predominantly dietary (37%). Since a significant proportion of respondents (19%) believe that food in resorts is normal – without differentiation elements based on the respondents' opinion that taste is a “trump card” in the sensory marketing strategy, it is necessary to shape a stronger taste identity both by analyzing sensory properties and by communicating them in terms of food, mineral or thermal waters or auxiliary elements used in treatments, such as bee products, phytotherapeutic products etc.

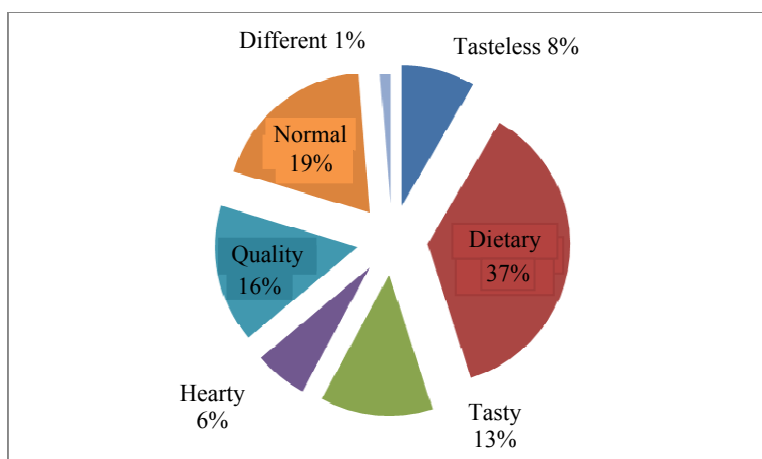


Figure 8. Perception of the taste of food in balneotherapy resorts

Regarding smell, another sense considered referential for balneotherapy resorts (Figure 9), it is considered by most respondents (40.4 %) as beneficial. However, 25.6% of respondents consider the smell of balneotherapy resorts as unpleasant. The two features are not mutually exclusive, as they are not the transcription of actual sensory properties, but, from the interpretation, they refer to the judgment of the sensation perceived through smell. Therefore, a smell with the same sensory properties (e.g., the salty air from salt mines etc.) can be considered following a judgment arising from multiple factors (prior experience, learning processes etc.) both, beneficial or bothersome. Therefore, the annihilation of the unpleasant smell perception from balneotherapy resorts may be the result of a learning process in health education, emphasizing the need for exposure to natural therapeutic factors.

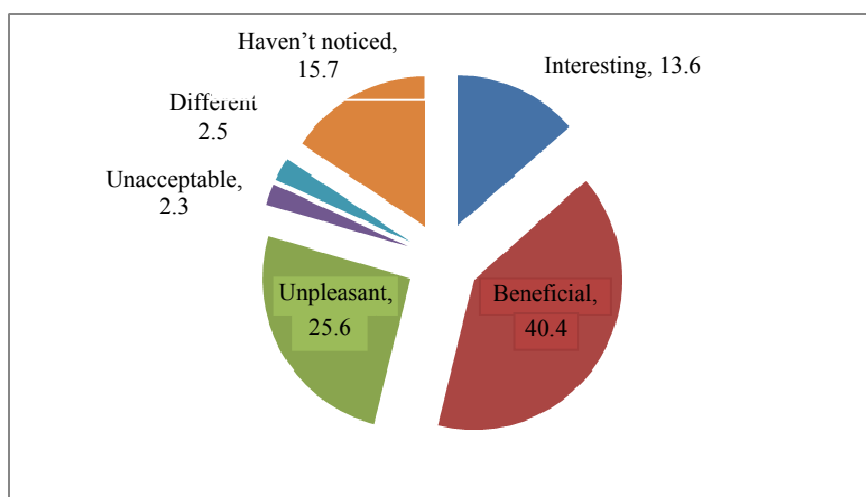


Figure 9. *The perception of air smell in balneotherapy resorts*

Regarding chromatics (as the stimulus of sight), the primary color perceived by 39% of respondents as being specific to balneotherapy resorts is gray (e.g., clay-colored) – Figure 10, followed by green – 24% (e.g., the color of forests) and white – 12% (e.g., water color). Colors listed as “identitary” for balneotherapy tourism generally should be analyzed by comparing the results with the colors of the identitary elements of balneotherapy resorts (e.g., mineral and thermal waters, the natural environment) to reveal the relationship between the respondents’/young people’s perception and reality to establish sensory marketing goals.

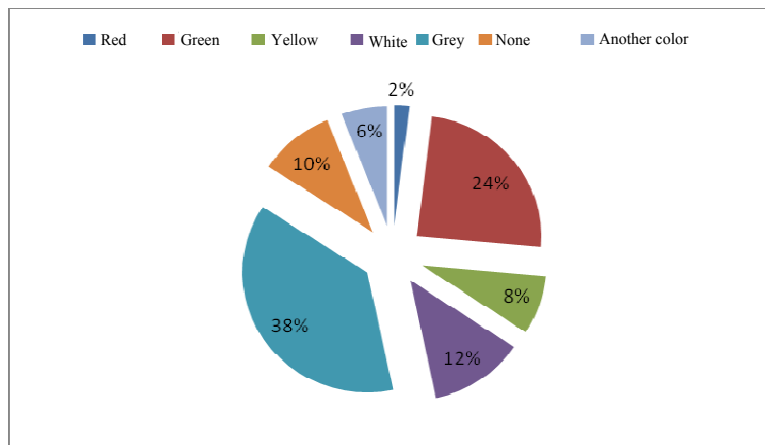


Figure 10. Color association with balneotherapy resorts in Romania

Exploiting sensory properties in an analytical approach of products considered unique (in terms of touristic experience) – with an emphasis on the senses considered striking in balneotherapy resorts – represents the main sensory vectors of destinations. In the case of balneotherapy resorts, products considered unique in the highest proportion (Figure 11) are mineral waters (with an average score of 4.35 on a scale of 1 to 5), followed by medicinal products (4.03). In their case, a thorough analysis must be made starting from the general sensory elements characteristic of all balneotherapy resorts which have mineral waters (to delimit an umbrella type sensory identity), continuing with the sensory particularities for each studied destinations (e.g., the smell of sulfurous waters in Băile Govora etc.).

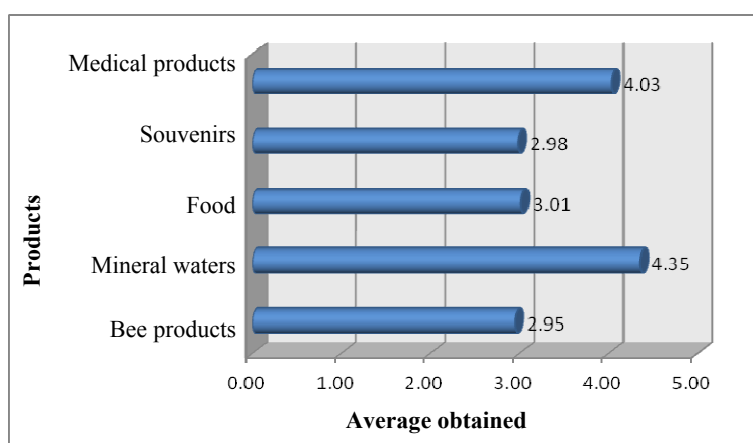


Figure 11. The extent to which the products found in balneotherapy destinations are considered to be unique

The image of balneotherapy destinations has a significant role in analyzing the perception of young people on balneotherapy resorts, both for actual consumers, but especially for potential consumers (who form a sensory reporting system based on the image of the destination, especially considering its affective component). Thus balneotherapy resorts are considered to a greater extent rather outdated than modern (with an average score of 2.35 on a semantic differential type scale with five gradations, where the gradation denoted by 1 represents the characteristic “outdated”, and the gradation denoted by 5 represents the characteristic “modern”) – Table 2. They are also considered to a greater extent passive than active (2.61), with a restricted offer rather than with a rich offer (2.63), boring rather than interesting (2.71), and cheap rather than expensive (2.91). The fact that, in the opinion of the consumer, balneotherapy resorts in Romania are not considered to have a rich offer can reduce the range of sensations felt, these being generated by activities considered boring, passive (in significant proportions). The image of balneotherapy destinations can be “updated” by the very sensation triggered by the activities that actually happen in balneotherapy resorts; thus relaunching of resorts can be achieved by creating new products whose benefits can be communicated/enhanced both by the cognitive communication of sensory properties (e.g., sense of touch produced by underwater shower leading to muscle relaxation etc.) and by their affective communication (e.g., the tranquility induced by the colors of the balneotherapy park in Băile Govora in spring).

Table 3. *Components of the image of balneotherapy resorts in Romania*

Outdated	1	2.35	5	Modern
Cheap	1	2.91	5	Expensive
Boring	1	2.71	5	Interesting
With a limited offer	1	2.63	5	With a rich offer
Passive	1	2.61	5	Active

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors.

The analysis of the opinion on the main components making up the essence of the marketing concept is important to lay the groundwork from which marketers should start to establish the sensory marketing strategy and the product strategy, respectively. In terms of balneotherapy tourism market, young people consider expanding the products covered by this type of tourism that addresses multiple market segments (segmented by age, income and diseases); the claim that balneotherapy tourism is strictly dedicated to people with certain health conditions recorded a rate of 61.6% - disagreement and strongly disagreement, the claim that health tourism is dedicated to the elderly recorded a rate of 56.5% - disagreement

and strongly disagreement, while the claim that balneotherapy tourism is dedicated to people with limited financial resources rated 70.7% – disagreement and strongly disagreement (Table 3). Regarding balneotherapy products, characteristics related to the sophistication and quality degree are highlighted; the claim that balneotherapy destinations are limited to medical activities recorded a rate of 76.3% – indifferent, disagree and strongly disagreement, while the claim that the quality of products in balneotherapy destinations is questionable recorded a rate of 69.7% – indifferent, agree and strongly agree. The fact that 40.3% of respondents do not have a well-defined opinion on the price of balneotherapy products, considering an exclusive distribution strategy, indicates the need for a better shaping of the marketing mix strategy, given the distinction between buyer and consumer of balneotherapy tourism products (68.6 % of young people who visited balneotherapy resorts in Romania said that another family member had taken this decision).

Table 4. *Claims regarding balneotherapy tourism in Romania*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Strongly agree
Balneotherapy tourism is strictly dedicated to people with certain health conditions.	14.3	47.3	17.7	16.7	3.3
Balneotherapy tourism is dedicated to the elderly.	13.7	42.8	15.7	23.1	4.8
Balneotherapy tourism is dedicated to people with limited financial resources.	19.0	51.7	22.6	6.4	0.4
Balneotherapy resorts prices are relatively low.	2.7	23.2	40.3	31.0	2.9
Access to balneotherapy destinations is usually done by means of institutions providing treatment vouchers.	5.5	15.3	25.7	47.3	6.2
Balneotherapy resorts in Romania are inferior to balneotherapy resorts abroad.	2.0	4.6	16.7	41.1	35.6
Balneotherapy destinations are limited to medical activities.	6.7	39.8	29.8	16.6	4.0
The quality of products in balneotherapy destinations is questionable.	3.5	26.7	40.2	24.8	4.7

Source: statistical survey conducted by the authors.

However, the importance of considering young people, from a balneotherapy destination marketing perspective, as attractive market segment is enhanced by awareness of the relevance of balneotherapy tourism in the future (recording an average score of 3.54, compared to 2.65 on a scale of 1 to 5), requiring a deeper and, at the same time, constant concern for this “product-market matrix”.

Limits

The exploration of sensations, the formation of perceptions depending on it, can be most accurately depicted right before or after and/or during an event. Research on this subject before or after living an actual touristic experience involves significant limitations on the intervention of other factors blocking the storing of an emotion, or only permitting its recollection in similar circumstances. Therefore, it is necessary that the results of such a research are compared to the results of a research carried out “in situ”, in which the impact of the stimuli to be present in a greater extent and to be rendered with greater accuracy by sensory memory – which intervenes automatically during short periods of time, the received stimuli being compared to those present in memory.

It is important to approach other market segments as well, regarded according to demographic, behavioral criteria and so on, to create the premises of a differentiated strategy that takes into account the needs, preferences and/or desires of each market segment considered.

Also, to get a broader image on the perception of balneotherapy resorts and to establish some sensory properties recognized as generally valid in order to lead to the drafting of a “sensory profile” of the balneotherapy destination, at the same time, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative research and/or marketing experiments, following that, depending on the result, the possible differentiation or uniqueness/brand elements of the destination to be detailed.

Conclusions

Having a role as important as that of the destination audit in marketing planning, in-depth analysis of sensations and perceptions of potential consumers (in the case of this study, young people) provides a similarly valuable “image” – of the reflection of consumer interaction regarding different types of resources, products and services from balneotherapy resorts. Based on the preponderance of the emotional factor in relation to the rational one in terms of tourism services, the way the potential consumer reacts to stimuli coming from the consumption of tourism services and how he perceives the “universe” of a destination becomes essential in creating the image of that destination.

Determining perceptions reveals the impact of the “hidden” dimensions of the tourism product on the consumer’s psyche that differ in intensity (in terms of sensation), but especially in interpretation, by the possibility that a touristic experience is perceived completely differently by two categories of consumers (e.g., considering the smell of balneotherapy resorts as beneficial and/or unpleasant etc.).

The relative place occupied by each sense in shaping a global or sequential touristic experience, followed by judgment and interpretation, can provide the framework for creating a sensory marketing strategy enabling/facilitating the creation of tourism products and/or services to be based on sensations, likely to be “absorbed” by consumers; the way the sensations they involve are assimilated should be consistent with the idea of consumers on balneotherapy tourism (e.g., considering certain perceptions on balneotherapy tourism likely to “validate” a certain experience through generalization and categorization). Also, they should be encircled in the proper reference system (e.g., enhanced attention on the manifestation of certain preferred/experienced stimuli) amid tourism type particularities and the unique elements of the resort in question, offering a range of action to the “universe of sensations” manifestation.

Outlining the “universe of sensations”, characteristic to balneotherapy resorts, provides support to strengthening the symbolic values in the minds of consumers, which in this context are coupled with the touristic experience through the five senses. The clear delineation of stimuli that define and/or differentiate balneotherapy resorts helps to position and to create, respectively, a sensory profile integrated in the destination’s image, adding value both by the emotional value of tourism products within it, and by the relationship of the destination with the consumer. Enhancing the emotional value leads in this way to the formation of a positive attitude towards the balneotherapy destination, which is an important component in the study of tourism services consumer behavior.

Note

- ⁽¹⁾ Questionnaires were filled in by students of the Faculties of Marketing, Commerce, Agrifood and Environment Economics (Bachelor’s degree cycle, class of 2012/2013, and Master’s degree cycle, class of 2013/2014) from the University of Economic Studies, and of the Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Business Engineering and Management from the “Politehnica” University of Bucharest, class of 2013/2014, whom we would like to thank this way.

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