

The importance of food and beverages in wellness experiences: a cross-continental analysis of tourists' perceptions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role that food and beverage (F&B) sensory stimuli play in building non-food-themed touristic experiences, such as wellness tourism experiences.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper adopts an asynchronous netnographic approach supported by software (T-Lab, 2021). The study was conducted on a database consisting of 3,141 reviews in English, left by customers of 38 wellness facilities (Spa Retreats) spread across 5 continents.

Findings – The analysis reveals that F&B stimuli contribute significantly to the tourist's perception of the wellness experience in a two-fold manner: on the one hand, they support the wellness experience, and on the other, through specific proposals (e.g. wine, vegan, detox, etc.), they qualify and differentiate the wellness experience in a hedonic rather than eudaimonic way.

Research limitations/implications – The present study contributes to managerial literature on the topic of gastronomic tourism and wellness tourism by providing, on an international scale, empirical evidence of (a) the importance and role of F&B touchpoints in hybrid gastronomic experiences; and (b) the presence of a variety of "wellness experiencescapes".

Originality/value – This study is the first attempt to measure the role of F&B in tourists' perceptions of non-food-themed experiences. The research not only provides new data on the wellness experience through a cross-continental analysis but also offers useful theoretical and managerial insights for the design of wellness tourism experiences.

Keywords Gastronomic tourism, Food and beverage, Tourist experience design, Experiencescape, Wellness tourism, Well-being tourism

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction and purpose of the research

Gastronomy is a fundamental part of the hospitality and tourism industry (Mariani and Okumus, 2022). The World Food Travel Association (WFTA, 2020) confirms the centrality of its role; according to their data: (1) local foods ranks third in terms of motivation behind the choice of a destination, following cultural and natural landscapes; (2) 25%, on average, of tourists' expenses concern food and beverage (F&B), with variations as low as 15% and as high as 35% depending on the demand segment. In fact, food is one of the factors determining attractiveness (Su *et al.*, 2020; De Albuquerque Meneguel *et al.*, 2019), memorability (Afaq *et al.*, 2022; Stone *et al.*, 2022; Sthapit *et al.*, 2019), and satisfaction (Kesgin *et al.*, 2022) of



the experiences, both in domestic (Sharma *et al.*, 2022) and in international (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017) tourism.

Nevertheless, despite gastronomy's pivotal role in the tourism industry, a recent review by Okumus *et al.* (2021) highlighted that the literature on food or gastronomic tourism remains scarce, thus pointing to the need to develop new methodological approaches and delve into new themes.

In this regard, Richards (2021) highlights how the most efficacious analytical key to understanding the dynamics of gastronomic tourism is the experiential one (Campos *et al.*, 2018); he underscores the pivotal role played by the consumer and the importance of all the emotional, hedonic and socio-relational aspects. It is through this lens that the author describes the “shift from food to foodies to foodscapes” (Richards, 2021, p. 1051) over three generations' worth of time: (1) experience of consuming food (service delivery); (2) food co-creation experience and (3) destination foodscapes (development of foodscapes linked to places). The third shift has led to the current perspective, which is focused on an experiential approach and characterized by the co-creation of value (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004) by multiple actors (consumers, producers, other actors and local communities) who belong to a given geographic or destination context (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Sthapit *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the gastronomic touristic experience is a unique and personal synthesis that is lived by tourists in their encounter with the various experience touchpoints of the gastronomic experiencescape (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). However, it bears noting that, to date, there is no consensus on how individual touchpoints are blended and/or combined by each tourist (Richards, 2021). Research on experience design (Stienmetz *et al.*, 2021; Tussyadiah, 2014) has shown how the importance of single touchpoints can vary, depending on variations in the characteristics, needs and expectations of the tourist during his/her customer journey. One experiential contact point (a winery, for example) can become the factor that is motivating, distinctive and qualifying for the touristic experience of an enotourist or, in the case of a cultural tourist, it becomes a simple element of support for the touristic experience as a whole (Henderson, 2009; Quan and Wang, 2004).

Tourism studies that look at the role played by food focus on food-themed touristic experiences (Okumus *et al.*, 2021; Richards, 2021), or, in other words, on the value propositions in which food is the principal factor of attraction for touristic consumption. Nevertheless, studies in this stream of research tend to overlook the supporting role played by food in touristic experiences where food does not represent an explicitly declared motivating factor for the voyage. Thus, the filling of this gap becomes an interesting endeavor in an effort to analyze how the sensorial stimuli linked to food contribute to the overall perception of experiences squarely placed within the area of wellness tourism (Pyke *et al.*, 2016; Smith and Kelly, 2006), where spas and wellness activities (e.g. massages) overwhelmingly represent the greatest attraction for tourists (GWI, 2021).

By focusing the present study within the context of wellness tourism, we can contribute to filling the gap in the extant gastronomic tourism literature. At the same time, we explore the emerging topic of the relationship between food and wellness (Kesgin *et al.*, 2022; Tiwari and Hashmi, 2022; Batat *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, despite a growing body of literature that associates wellness with F&B (Huang *et al.*, 2019), additional research gaps can be identified. There are few studies that explicitly underscore the role of F&B-related activities and resources in the tourist wellness experience (Kesgin *et al.*, 2022; Suban, 2022; Han *et al.*, 2018), and, to date, there have emerged no cross-continental empirical studies that analyze any geographical and cultural differences of the F&B wellness experience (Dillette *et al.*, 2020).

This study aims to fill these gaps by empirically investigating, on an international scale, tourists' perceptions of the wellness proposals of Spa Retreats (destination and resort spa)

(Smith and Dryglas, 2020). Consistent with this proposition, the research questions that guide the present work are as follows:

- RQ1. In tourists' perceptions, what role do F&B components play in the "wellness experience" value proposition of Spa Retreats?
- RQ2. In tourists' perceptions, do F&B components offered in Spa Retreats vary according to the geographical and cultural context?

This paper analyzes the comments posted by over 3,000 wellness tourists, through an asynchronous netnographic approach, through which we provide the following theoretical contributions. First, our study contributes to gastronomic tourism literature by analyzing the role played by sensorial F&B stimuli in hybrid gastronomic experiences (Richards, 2021) where food is not the primary motivator for the trip. Second, the study contributes to the literature on wellness tourism (Suban, 2022) through the analysis of the role played by perception in hedonic and eudaimonic experiences. Third, the present paper makes a contribution to the broader literature on tourism experience design by underscoring how the client's touristic wellness experience is a holistic one involving a variety of touchpoints. Fourth, this study provides a cross-continental insight into wellness tourism experiences by highlighting the variety of "wellness experiencescapes" available on an international scale.

The findings of this study suggest that Spa Retreat managers would do well to consider the offering of F&B as a strategic lever that would not only increase the client's value perception but would also be a differentiating factor vis à vis the competition. From this standpoint, the research highlights the opportunities for wellness facilities to enhance the local enogastronomic supply chain through collaborative networks.

The paper is structured as follows: section two presents the theoretical background, section three outlines the research methodology adopted, and four presents the findings of the study. The last section provides a discussion of the findings and their implications; finally, it acknowledges the limitations of the study and suggests future avenues of research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Wellness tourism experience: the importance of customer perception in spas

The concept of tourism experience became central to tourism literature (Richards, 2021; Adhikari and Bhattacharya, 2016; Walls *et al.*, 2011) following the research on experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). In the logic of experience (Pencarelli and Forlani, 2018), both production and commercial dynamics change as tourists are no longer passive users of the good or service but are active actors and co-creators of their own experience (Campos *et al.*, 2018).

In this framework, the experience designer (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2021; Stienmetz *et al.*, 2021; Tussyadiah, 2014) recognizes the need for knowledge of the tourist's real perception (site and time specific), not only in the co-production phase, but also in the design phase. In the theoretical framework of tourism experience design (TED), starting from the distinction between "peak experiences and supporting experiences" (Quan and Wang, 2004), Tussyadiah (2014) suggests that the tourism offer can create an immersive and coherent experiential platform only if it is able to map the real relationships between the sensory stimuli and their perceptions. This assessment is also relevant to the definition of memorability (Afaq *et al.*, 2022; Sthapit *et al.*, 2019; Han *et al.*, 2018) and the transformative capacity of the experiences themselves (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2021). Ultimately, the experiential analysis perspective emphasizes that the definition of the value proposition can only be developed through the analysis of tourists' perceptions.

With reference to the wellness tourist experience, in the wake of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) "The Four Realms of an Experience" model, Huang *et al.* (2019) and Hwang and Lee (2019)

highlighted how the existence of a plurality of experiential dimensions (aesthetic; entertainment; educational; escapist) fuels consumers' perception of greater well-being and induces processes of tourist loyalty. These studies confirm the findings of works which, despite not using an explicitly experiential perspective, associate well-being with a multidimensional experience condition (Dillette *et al.*, 2020; Kazakov and Oyner, 2020).

Among the various wellness-driven value propositions, the product type that best lends itself to the concept of holistic wellness is certainly the one offered by "Spa Retreats". Indeed, this offer combines various types of services and experiences (heterogeneity of treatments) in formulas that vary according to the country taken into consideration (Han *et al.*, 2018).

For example, Pforr and Locher (2012), in their study of the German Spa and Wellness center industry, underline how these centers offer a wide variety of wellness services such as meditation, beauty treatments, healthy eating, weight loss programs, and health education to promote physical, mental and social well-being. Rodrigues *et al.* (2020) emphasize that in Hotel Spas in Portugal the factors that positively influence guest satisfaction are rooms, nature, food, location and value for money. Additionally, a growing number of international contributions from China, Canada and India highlight the role of food in the holistic wellness products offered by Spa Retreats (Kim and Yang, 2021; Mishra and Panda, 2021).

This type of holistic tourism offer, in which a variety of stimuli or factors come together, appears therefore especially suitable for assessing the contribution of F&B factors in the co-creation of wellness tourism experiences.

2.2 F&B in the wellness experience

The multidimensional and complex role of F&Bs in the creation of tourism experiences is therefore well-established (Pourfakhimi *et al.*, 2021; Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017), and in recent years, academic studies have highlighted a significant link with aspects involving health and well-being (Sirgy, 2019). Recent studies (Kesgin *et al.*, 2022; Andreu *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2019) have established that there is a growing demand for food experiences by wellness tourists, implying a greater focus in the proposals offered by destinations and businesses. From the analysis of the food tourism literature (Okumus *et al.*, 2021; Stone *et al.*, 2018; Henderson, 2009; Quan and Wang, 2004), it emerges that food (1) is a fundamental (supporting) factor in each type of experience or (2) represents the defining (peak) element of the experience in gastronomic and beverage-related tourism.

With reference to wellness tourism, F&B is clearly a supporting element given that during their wellness holiday, tourists will certainly need transport, food and accommodation. For some, food is a source of nourishment and thus, a generic interest in food is manifested (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Indeed, Hwang and Lee (2019) argue that food services have a positive impact on the overall experience, thus affecting the perceived well-being of tourists.

At the same time, food can be a key element in creating wellness experiences characterized as a hedonic rather than eudaimonic feature (Filep *et al.*, 2022; Ahn *et al.*, 2019; Voigt *et al.*, 2010). According to the hedonic model (Rahmani *et al.*, 2018), well-being is primarily related to momentary pleasure, enjoyment and positive emotions, i.e. a psychological state of pleasure closely linked to the five senses. The hedonic experience associated with F&B is reflected in the pleasure derived from what one eats and drinks; in this sense, several authors have identified how tourists' visits to specific wellness and spa resort and destinations are characterized by this type of experience (Lakićević *et al.*, 2021; Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017). In this logic, alcohol consumption is also depicted as a hedonic, short-lived and relaxing experience (Kim and Yang, 2021), which is why wine consumption can also positively impact the well-being of tourists (Kotur, 2022; Fiore *et al.*, 2019).

From the eudaimonic perspective (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Rahmani *et al.*, 2018), well-being is a state that is achieved in the long term and includes concepts relating to self-actualization and

success in general. Here, reference is made to the cognitive perception of the individual, who seeks to give deeper meaning to his or her existence (e.g. spiritual tourism experiences). From this point of view, food is more closely associated with a concept of health and is an element of healing and regeneration; examples include detox diets (Kokkranikal and Carabelli, 2021), healthy eating (He *et al.*, 2021; Huang and Xu, 2014), nutritional foods (Luo *et al.*, 2018) and intermittent fasting in nutrition (Kiryakova-Dineva *et al.*, 2019). In this vein, the study by Lee *et al.* (2020) shows that eating healthy food, such as plant-based food, is associated with a cleansing experience, improving digestion and increasing physical energy. Pourfakhimi *et al.* (2021) also point out that experiences related to consuming genuine and healthy food hold significant importance for the eudaimonic aspects of well-being.

The extant literature recognizes F&B qualitatively, through the analysis of individual regional cases, as a component of the wellness tourism experience, without, however, defining its role and importance. In consideration of this gap, it seems interesting to measure this relationship systematically by comparing a plurality of situations at the international level. Moreover, it is also important to analyze the phenomenon from a cross-continental perspective, striving to understand how the support service, the hedonic and the eudaimonic dimensions shape consumers' perceptions of the various holistic wellness tourism formulas.

3. Methodological approach

From a methodological point of view, studies on experience design (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2021) point out that the dimensions that characterize experiences must be analyzed via knowledge of the tourist's actual perception. In this perspective, Tussyadiah (2014, p. 553) recognizes the existence of different methodologies "to capture tourists' narratives about their experience", but suggests that they should be "naturalistic inquiries" such as "phenomenology and ethnographic studies". Immersive research approaches involving the observation of the researcher and/or the self-observation of the tourist in the social, environmental and temporal context (throughout their entire experience and/or at a specific moment of it) are therefore to be favored (Stienmetz *et al.*, 2021). Most of these methodologies use primary data, but with the proliferation of digital environments (social networks, blogs, vlogs, online forums, etc.) there is increasing use of techniques that observe the experience through secondary data (blog posts, stories on social media, reviews, etc.) grouped under the 'netnography' label (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018; Costello *et al.*, 2017; Whalen, 2018). Netnography methods are 'naturalistic' and present a number of advantages: (1) non-intrusive; (2) use of available content and (3) quick, efficient and cost effective.

Given the large amount of qualitative and narrative data on consumer experiences published directly by users (UCG), this methodological solution stands out as a promising opportunity for tourism studies (Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019; Whalen, 2018), as long as the consistency between the objectives of the analysis and the inherent limitations of a passive and asynchronous netnographic approach are considered in the research design phase (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018; Costello *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, solutions involving the use of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software appear particularly useful and promising (Whalen, 2018).

To ensure qualitative research rigor (McGinley *et al.*, 2021; Rageh *et al.*, 2013), the authors of the present paper followed the Kozinets (2015) method. The steps entailed: (1) research design; (2) data collection; (3) data analysis and (4) research representation.

- (1) Research design. The research questions, as stated above, identify the need to understand the salient aspects of wellness experiences actually undergone by tourists in a wide variety of geographical and cultural contexts (cross-continently). Such studies are now feasible, using data available in real time on social platforms for

creating and sharing travel experiences (Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019). In this study, TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com) was chosen as the social sharing platform because it is the most widely used platform for this type of analysis, along with blogs (Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019).

- (2) Data collection. In line with Dillette *et al.* (2020, p. 5), the search for and selection of the most qualified “Spa Retreat” tourist facilities in the world was carried out on www.google.com through the string (key phrase) “top wellness retreats in ****”, where **** represent the names of the identified continents or sub-continents. Having obtained a database of 120 “destination e resort spa” facilities, 38 were selected to represent the different areas homogeneously, with a fairly even distribution of approximately 500 reviews per continent. For each facility, comments published between 2018 and 2021 in English were downloaded from www.tripadvisor.com. In line with previous studies (Thanh and Kiriva, 2018), comments that were excessively short (under 30 words) or too long (over 500 words) were removed. In cases where the number of reviews was under 100, all the comments were included in the analysis. In facilities with more than 100 reviews, a random drawing of 100 comments per facility was carried out. At the end of the data collection, a total of 3,141 comments were obtained, taken from 38 facilities located in six different geographical areas (4 in Africa; 6 in North America; 6 in South-Central America; 8 in Asia and Oceania; 9 in Europe; 5 in the Middle-East).
- (3) Data analysis. The codes that were identified refer to nine qualifying dimensions of the wellness experience (Dini and Pencarelli, 2022); a confirmatory, qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) supported by the T-Lab 2021 software was also conducted. The main function of the software was to support researchers in the preparation and analysis of texts. Specifically, the research team applied T-Lab 2021 to carry out the following operations: (1) clean the texts by eliminating ‘stop words’ and lemmatization; (2) analyze word frequency (word analysis); (3) support coding by disambiguating word meaning (co-word analysis) and (4) cluster words through co-occurrence analysis (co-word analysis). The first phase of text coding serves to identify basic codes (King *et al.*, 2018) to then be grouped into thematic categories. The use of lemmatized words as the basic unit of analysis allows this coding to be automated through the use of data mining software. The analysis performed is thus objective, verifiable and replicable (McGinley *et al.*, 2021); it also returns a quantitative measure of the phenomenon through frequency analysis. Starting from the complete list of words produced by the software, the basic codes for the analysis were derived through a three-step selection process: (1) only words with a frequency greater than 20 (frequency on comments greater than 1%) were considered; (2) generic verbs, the names of the analyzed facilities, the names of cities and regions were eliminated. The result of this first step produced a coding spectrum of 254 words and 40,163 occurrences; (3) only words that could be traced back to the nine wellness categories were considered significant codes for the analysis of holistic well-being experiences. By comparing the analyses carried out separately by two members of the research team, it emerged that of the 254 codes used, 120 were found to be non-significant and/or ambiguous: they were therefore disambiguated by analyzing one-to-one connections between the words, with the support of the co-word analysis tools of the T-lab software. At the end of the process, 58 words were disambiguated and were classified as codes, while 62 words were eliminated because they were not relevant to the purpose of the work. The procedure produced a final list of 192 codes and 35,760 occurrences. The second step was to derive interpretive meanings (King *et al.*, 2018)

through linkage analysis between the basic codes. To understand how the most recurrent words were associated with each other to construct complex concepts, a co-word analysis was performed. Using the T-Lab software, the keywords were subjected to hierarchical clustering, thus producing clusters representing topics of discussion by Spa Resort customers. To facilitate reading, these were graphically represented by a similarity matrix based on multidimensional scaling (MDS), which represents the relationship between data in a reduced space, similar to a “map”. To answer the second research question, a two-stage analysis was also carried out: (1) continent-wide frequency analysis of the F&B terms to highlight keywords characterizing the individual geographical contexts; (2) continent-wide co-word analysis of the keywords to reconstruct meaning and context.

- (4) Research representation. To ensure the reliability and validity of the interpretive coding, two team members coded the words separately by associating them with the categories. Double-checks were thus carried out and in the case of disagreement over the association, disambiguation was carried out by comparing the meaning and use of the word within the text. This evaluation was carried out with the support of the ‘word sequence analysis’ tool of the T-Lab software. Where disagreements remained between the two members that could not be resolved, a third person was introduced into the discussion. This procedure ensured consensus on all codes (100% final agreement).

4. Findings

4.1 The role and importance of F&B elements in the ‘wellness experience’ value proposition in Spa Retreats (RQ1)

The words with the highest frequency and centrality in tourists’ comments were those referring to the Spa facility and related services: “room”, “hotel”, “staff”, “service”, “resort”, “spa”, “pool”, and “villa”. Particular importance was also given to the F&B dimension, which thus emerged as a “structural” component of the resort product: “food”, “restaurant”, “breakfast”, “dinner”, and “meal”.

Comparing the frequencies of the 192 codes attributed to the nine dimensions (Appendix 1) revealed that the F&B terms added up to 7,721 absolute frequencies, second only to the ‘structure’ dimension with 13,273 frequencies, and higher than the ‘Spa, Care of body and mind’ dimension which characterized the experience (5,830).

Figure 1 graphically depicts the MDS matrix, which is meaningful in that the stress value (0.1541) is well below the accepted threshold for a two-dimensional map with 100 elements (0.396; Sturrock and Rocha, 2000). Within the matrix, the diameter of a term reflects the frequency with which it appears in the analyzed text, while the colors represent the subdivision by theme of the most frequently discussed topics (clusters). Only the top 100 words by frequency are represented in the figure, as a higher number would have made the graphic matrix difficult to read.

What emerges from the analysis of the MDS map (Figure 1) is, first of all, that the main cluster consists of the structural elements of the resorts already highlighted by the frequency analysis (orange color): “room”, “hotel”, “staff”. It is interesting to note, however, that the terms “food”, “restaurant”, “breakfast”, “dinner”, “lunch” and “buffet” are also associated with this cluster, confirming the importance attributed to the F&B component by consumers in their evaluation of the wellness experience. In addition to this central cluster, others characterized by more specific terms and connected with service and experiential elements emerge: the light blue cluster relates to classic spa services; the dark green cluster refers to differentiating elements of the facility such as the swimming pool and the suite; the light blue

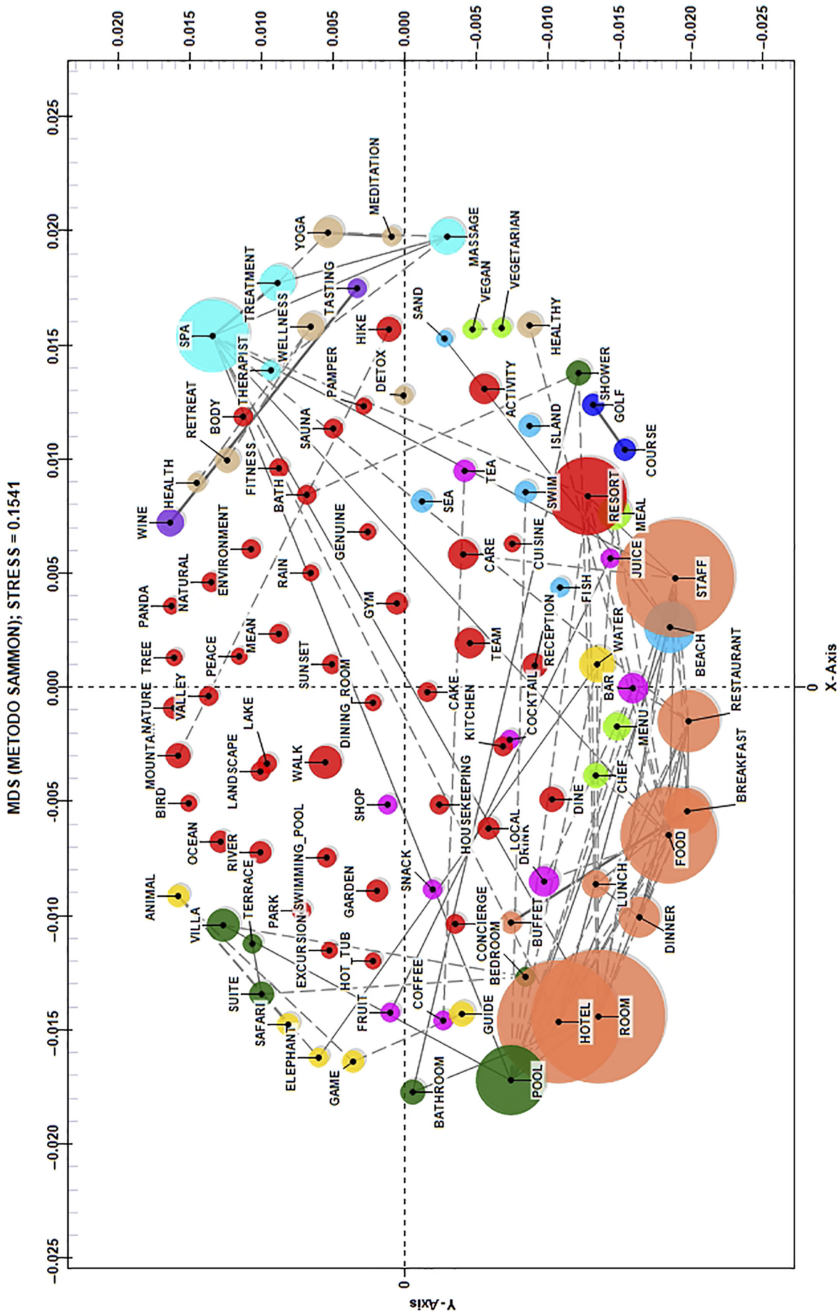


Figure 1. MDS map of comments relating to the wellness experience

cluster encompasses beach and bathing services and activities; the pink and purple clusters define entertainment F&B elements, the beige cluster reflects spiritual/healthy activities; the light green cluster groups together health-related F&B elements; the yellow and blue clusters depict specific entertainment activities (“safari” and “golf”) not directly connected to wellness; finally, the red cluster appears to be a residual conglomerate group in which we find structural and service elements (resort, reception, concierge), components referable to the environmental and contextual dimension (river, ocean, lake, etc.), wellness activities (fitness, sauna, hot tub, hike) and F&B elements (cake, cuisine, kitchen).

The analysis of customers’ reviews thus confirms the findings of the literature, i.e. that spas are perceived by customers as places that offer multidimensional value propositions based on experiential logics of holistic well-being.

Focusing exclusively on the clusters that refer to the F&B dimension, it appears that the terms describing this component are not associated with a single cluster, but relate to two different situations:

- (1) The orange cluster includes, in addition to the basic structural elements of the offer (room, hotel, staff, restaurant), the words “food”, “dinner”, “breakfast”, “lunch” and “buffet”. This recurrence in the comments confirms that the F&B elements are essential supporting components of the wellness experience;
- (2) The remaining words referring to F&B have lower frequencies and are placed in different clusters (pink, purple, red and light green) forming specific value propositions linked to wellness activities, entertainment and/or environmental contexts. These F&B elements are less recurrent in the comments and are therefore less representative phenomena, but at the same time, they do seem to play a role in enriching and differentiating the offer.

In order to investigate the second aspect and to assess possible unifying traits of the different proposals, words attributable to structural elements (orange cluster and dark green cluster) were excluded and a correspondence analysis was carried out (Lancia, 2022). This factor analysis made it possible to extract new summary variables of the relevant information contained in the co-occurrence data tables.

As pointed out by Lancia (2022), each factor organizes a spatial dimension, which can be represented as a line or an axis, at the center (or barycenter) of which is the value ‘0’ and which is bi-polar towards the ‘negative’ (–) and ‘positive’ (+) ends, so that the objects placed on opposite poles are the most different from each other. This analysis technique also allowed the preparation of the Cartesian representation of the information shown in Figure 2, above.

Consistent with the literature, the two dimensions represented in Figure 2 were interpreted in the following way: on the X-axis, the type of wellness experience (hedonism vs eudaimonic); on the Y-axis, the type of atmosphere and environmental context (green nature vs seaside).

With reference to the F&B elements, the correspondence analysis confirms how the variety of experiential proposals associated with F&B can be traced back to the two macro-categories identified in the literature: hedonic (wine tasting, coffee, cocktails, etc.) and eudaimonic (vegan, genuine, vegetarian, detox).

4.2 The importance of F&B components in varying geographical and cultural contexts, customer perceptions of Spa Retreats (RQ2)

In the cross-continental analysis of the frequencies and MDS maps, it appears that, overall, the wellness tourist experience perceived in the structures of the various areas of the planet carries a common connotation at the international level. In particular, both in terms of frequency of the words and their clusters, on the individual continents, the value formula highlighted in the previous paragraph is repeated: a holistic proposal with a central structural

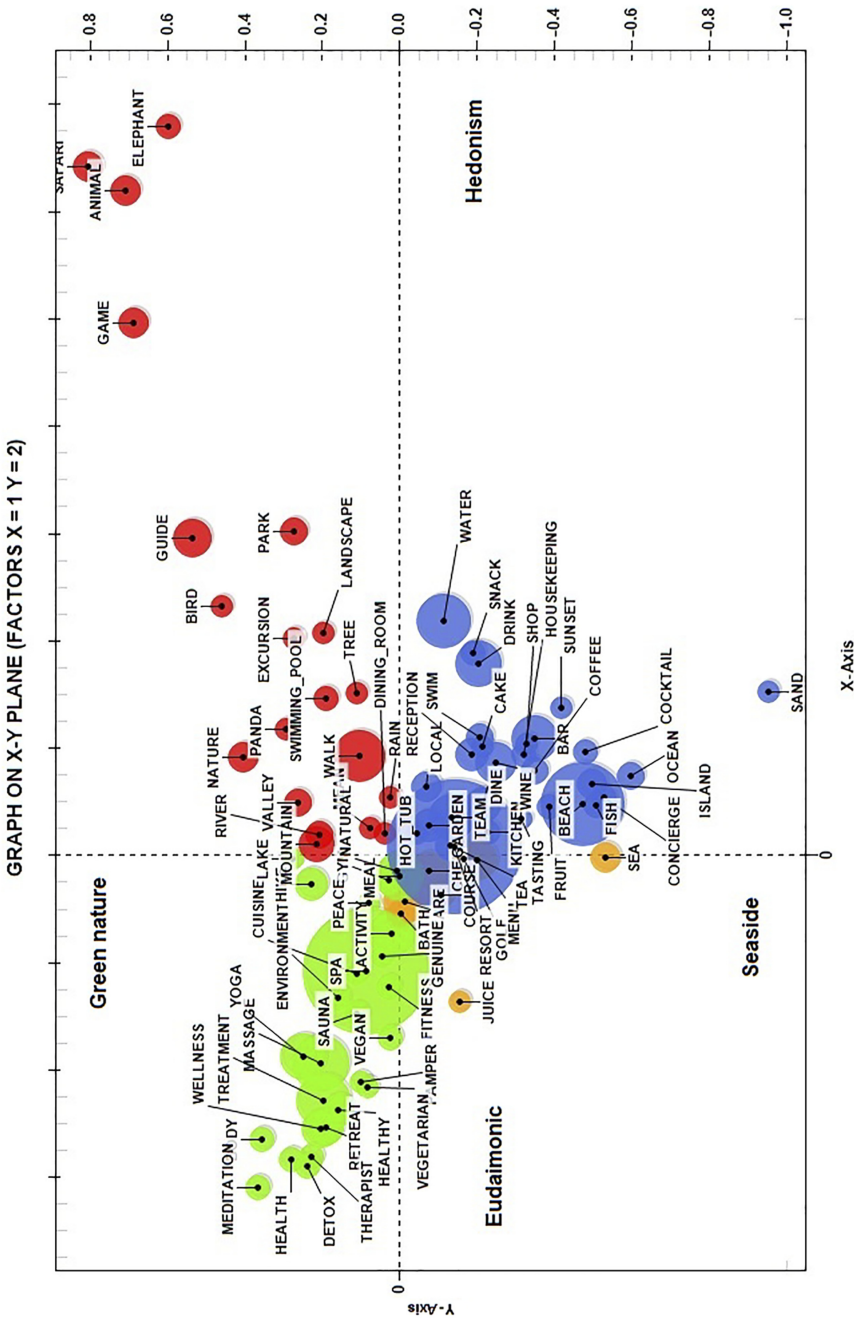


Figure 2. Correspondence analysis

component flanked by the spa component and the F&B component defined as service. As highlighted above, the most significant differences arise above all in the experiential activities (e.g. safaris in Africa, wine tasting in Europe, etc.), which define the specific holistic declination of the individual proposals. In this category of elements, it is also possible to include codes referable to F&B present in the yellow, red, and light green clusters.

In order to highlight whether and how these specific F&B elements allow for differentiation between the proposals of the individual geographic areas, the most significant F&B codes were analyzed comparatively by characterization of the experience and by percentage frequency in the individual areas (present in at least 5% of comments).

In Europe, there is a prevalence of hedonic F&B experiential terms (wine, tasting, and vineyard). As is evident from some of the comments, wine-related experiences represent one of the main elements of differentiation that enhances the wellness experience in a hedonic sense:

we came here to partake in the harvest experience (picking grapes and learning about the wines) and it was AMAZING! The views are out of this world, the food and wine is delicious, and I highly recommend this experience . . .

. . . I highly recommend the wine testing tour . . .

. . . the bar is run by a team of professionals and offers great drinks and precious advice on the regional production of wines and Ports.

Also in South America, tourists' comments refer to a specific hedonic experiential element, praising the role of coffee ("*these were beautiful, spacious and very well equipped including a French press and coffee beans as well as tea bags*", "*I would have my coffee sitting out on the patio*").

In the Asian context, elements related to a health dimension (detox, vegan, fruit, tea) are more popular, whereby food and drink represent an element of healing and regeneration as part of an eudaimonic detoxification process (Kokkranikal and Carabelli, 2021) for tourists:

. . . if you are looking for a detox, this place is the best. Amazing vegan food is served in their restaurant! Vegan only!!!

. . . I do not know where to begin with the food at Fivements. It's probably the most delicious healthy meals I have had in my life! . . . transforming my life into something I never thought was possible! Such a magical healing place!

I did the 5 day Detox Programme and loved it . . . is much more than a Spa, it is a holistic approach to health which comprises the Ayurvedic treatments combined with yoga, meditation, healthy cooking, etc.

In North America, there emerge facilities with both eudaimonic features ("*delicious vegetarian gourmet meals and well-appointed facilities . . . A very luxurious, healthy, relaxing and rejuvenating experience for a very reasonable cost*") and hedonic features ("*We did the farm tasting tour, a wine tasting and visited the spa during our stay - all were great but I enjoyed the wine tasting the most! Even though it was expensive-they served quality wine during the tasting so it was worth it*").

By contrast, the analysis of the F&B component in the areas situated in the Middle East and Africa did not seem to bring out any particular patterns. No clear elements were detected.

Finally, among the codes with a lower frequency (less than 5% on a continental basis and 2% on a global basis), the presence of a series of codes referring to typical local cuisines – that change according to the geographical context – was observed: Indian, Thai, Japanese, Italian and African. The low frequency in the use of these terms highlights how in most cases wellness experiences are proposed with value formulas having a substantially international gastronomic feature.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Discussion of results

The first aim of this work (RQ1) was to understand the role of the F&B component in the perception of holistic wellness experiences in the Spa Retreat world.

Our findings confirm the importance of the sensorial stimuli of F&Bs in the co-creation processes of the touristic experience (Afaq *et al.*, 2022). In fact, in tourists' comments, the codes "food", "restaurant", "breakfast", "dinner", "lunch" and "buffet", are among the most frequently recurring, appearing together as key components of the structural elements of the resort and destination spa.

Moreover, the study confirms how the customer's perception derives from a holistic consideration of multiple factors (Bjork and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019); in this view, the single touchpoints are cognitively assembled by the tourist, in experiencescape logic (Chen *et al.*, 2020). These spa facilities propose a holistic wellness experience in which the spa proposition (spa, treatment(s), massage(s), etc.) is enhanced with distinguishing elements belonging to different realms (environment, sport, etc. see Table A1 (Appendix)), depending on the features and specificities of the destination.

As regards the role played by the F&B component within the wellness experience, the analysis shows, firstly, that the F&B service components are essential (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020) and constitute structural supporting elements in all the different wellness value formulas, and secondly, that in some cases, specific foods or beverages also qualify as elements of enrichment and differentiation of the offer in hedonic or eudaimonic logic.

As per our research hypothesis, F&B is not the primary motivating factor for spa resort and destination tourists. Nevertheless, our findings reveal that touchpoints linked to food constitute an indispensable and ongoing presence over the course of the vacation, in the form of breakfasts, snacks, happy hours, dinners, and so on, to become moments of truth (Grönroos, 1990) that are crucial to either the creation or destruction of value.

Lastly, the present study yields empirical evidence of how, in experiencescape logic (Richards, 2021), there exists three different formulas of wellness experiences made of different combinations of environmental context (green nature and seaside) and wellness activities (hedonic and eudaimonic) proposed by destination actors. As Figure 2 shows, eudaimonic experiences are proposed in a 'green nature' context, while hedonic experiences can be staged in both types of environmental context. The F&B component is part of both of these experiences, but with different enogastronomy proposals, because they are so closely linked to the theme that characterizes the experience (hedonic and eudaimonic). The second aim (RQ2) was to understand whether the role of the F&B components offered in Spa Retreats varied according to the geographical and cultural context of the destination. The cross-continental analysis and interpretation of the most significant comments left by tourists showed that the formula distribution is not homogeneous in a geographical sense. It seems, in fact, that the environmental and cultural specificities tend to favor one proposal model over another. For example, in Asia eudaimonic formulas prevail, while in Europe they are mostly hedonic and in the other continents, various combinations of these propositions are evident. Within the specific formula, the F&B components play a significant role and distinguish the proposed wellness experience (e.g. wine in Europe, vegan and detox in Asia).

5.2 Theoretical implications

First, the present paper contributes to the literature on gastronomic tourism (Mariani and Okumus, 2022) by analyzing the role played by the sensorial stimuli of a touristic experience in which F&B does not constitute the primary motivating element of a vacation. This study provides initial indicators regarding the role played by food-based resources in hybrid gastronomic experiences (Richards, 2021), by highlighting how eating and drinking can

represent important factors in creating, enhancing or destroying value as perceived by wellness tourists.

Second, this research contributes to the literature on wellness tourism (Suban, 2022; Kazakov and Oyner, 2020; Dillette *et al.*, 2020). In fact, the empirical evidence confirms the existence of two different typologies (Voigt *et al.*, 2010) of wellness experience, i.e. hedonic and eudaimonic, and shows their widespread international diffusion. From this perspective, our findings underscore the strong connection between the wellness formula adopted and the environmental (green nature and seaside) and socio-cultural resources of the destination. While wellness services (spas, and so on) tend to display internationally recognizable standards and features, highly differentiated offers and even unique propositions are the fruit of enhanced local environmental (natural landscapes and scenery) and cultural resources (medicine, food, sports activities, etc.). These local resources reflect the importance of the territory, which adds to the value proposition of the wellness facility in loco.

Third, this study makes a contribution to a more generalized body of literature on tourism experience design (Stienmetz *et al.*, 2021; Campos *et al.*, 2018), by providing empirical confirmation of the interpretative effectiveness of third generation experience models. In this regard, the analysis of the number of comments on single touchpoints (word frequency) and of their interrelatedness (co-word analysis) yielded results that underscore the holistic nature of the touristic experience (through the various clusters – see map in Figure 1) and show how it involves a variety of touchpoints in the spa resort and destination. Figure 2 map gives evidence of how these touchpoints are integrated and interconnected so as to form specific experiencescapes (Chen *et al.*, 2020). These are characterized by combinations of environmental elements or contexts (green nature and seaside) and themed activities (hedonic or eudaimonic). From the analysis of these experiencescapes, it appears that in resort and destination spas, although the F&B dimensions are central to the creation of wellness (in both models), they do not configure into a destination foodscape (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019).

Lastly, the “wellness experiencescapes” that emerge from this study both define and characterize the formulas of experiential value that foresee a variety of touchpoints requiring creative partnerships among the different actors (Ferraris *et al.*, 2021). These would form constellations of local actors in which Spa Retreat facilities would act as hubs (Franco *et al.*, 2022).

5.3 Managerial implications

From a managerial point of view, this study suggests there is merit in considering F&B, a fundamental component of the value propositions of Spa Retreats that aim to intercept the segment of tourists interested in a concept of holistic wellness. In the experiential perspective, the managerial challenge for companies is therefore to evaluate, in each specific context (geographical and/or cultural), whether to formulate F&B proposals via internal resources, or to turn to specialized operators and build value networks with partners (Franco *et al.*, 2022; Vrontis *et al.*, 2016) and territorial DMOs (Melis *et al.*, 2022). In fact, in order to meet the holistic needs of the demand, businesses must design and make an increasing number of wellness services and experiences available for tourists, through a process of value co-creation, which would entail combining components of wellness tourism (e.g. spas, hot springs), F&B, sports and cultural tourism, etc. (Han *et al.*, 2018). In this way, tourists see themselves as active players and co-creators of their wellness experience (Xie *et al.*, 2021; Huang *et al.*, 2019).

Ultimately, this research offers ideas for both spa managers and destination managers. On the one hand, the main challenge for private actors lies in taking organizational and management measures to integrate a cohesive set of territorial experiential components into their tourism offer that will meet and exceed the expectations of wellness tourists.

Furthermore, marketing experts could promote the local F&B scene, after thorough research and consultation with nutritionists, as a healthy dietary choice (Tiwari and Hashmi, 2022); another option would be to enhance and promote its hedonic aspects, to attract those market segments that are more oriented towards in-the-moment pleasures.

On the other hand, destination managers, once they recognize that Spa Retreat facilities are privileged experiential platforms also for F&B, should be able to actively interact with private entities to agree on value formulas (hedonic vs eudaimonic, for instance) capable of enhancing specific quality F&B components (quality food and wine, organic products, detox products, etc.). This process of integrating the destination and the spa facility could open the door to new commercial opportunities for innovative service providers who can create and offer culinary experiences that are not only genuine and unique but that will also lead to sustainable and eco-friendly practices (Soltani *et al.*, 2020). In the experiential perspective, this activity of aligning the different territorial proposals must always consider the point of view of wellness tourists. Ultimately, F&B components should not be underestimated but rather, enhanced and promoted in original and distinctive value propositions by destinations where the primary attraction for tourists lies in the availability of traditional wellness-based services but where enogastronomic services and territorial features can also act as significant competitive levers.

5.4 Limitations and future research directions

As with any research, the present study is not without its limitations. First, our research only considers the post-experience perception of (English-speaking) international tourists. Therefore, it would be opportune for future research efforts to compare the post-experience comment analysis with pre-experience and in-experience empirical evidence (qualitative and quantitative). Moreover, due to the methodological approach adopted, our study does not take into consideration either the demographics or provenance of tourists.

Despite these limitations, the present study highlights the role played by F&B in tourists' wellness experiences. It also suggests a number of possible future research pathways. For example, the quantitative investigation of specific and representative demand segments, both domestic (Sharma *et al.*, 2022) and international, could help further and deepen understanding the various consumption models vis-à-vis cultural differences (Ferraris *et al.*, 2019). In addition, given that some studies have shown how tourists change their dietary habits while on holiday (e.g. Santos *et al.*, 2020), another line of research could be to explore whether consumer behaviors tied to F&B within wellness experiences (both hedonic and eudaimonic) are: (a) consistent with tourists' lifestyles (Kesgin *et al.*, 2022) and (b) transformational to the point of influencing post-vacation attitudes toward food (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2021).

Another path that merits consideration regards methodology: a mixed-method approach could be adopted to incorporate other qualitative analysis methods (neuroscience, participatory netnography, in-depth interviews, focus groups) to understand tourists' expectations in the pre-experience phase; ethnography or neuroscience could be used in the in-experience phase to monitor emotions in real time.

On the supply side, because the sample of Spa Retreats is composed of a limited number of facilities per continent and the results might therefore be affected by the peculiar characteristics of some facilities and/or locations, future research could delve more deeply into these themes with resort and destination spa managers in order to shed light on the dynamics involved in F&B design in hybrid and holistic products.

Lastly, in the aim of enriching the descriptive and interpretative framework of the F&B and wellness phenomenon, further studies on destination foodscapes are necessary if we are to discern the experiential themes within holistic offers (hedonic and/or eudaimonic) that are

the most widespread and the governance models that are the most suitable for managing the constellations of actors that co-create the touristic experiences on the destinations stage.

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ID	Structure		Spa-Care of body and mind		Medical		Natural environment		Spirituality		Culture		Food and beverage		Sport		Entertainment							
	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %	Occ.	Prep %						
1	ROOM	2822	89.8%	SPA	139	44.4%	CARE	35	11.3%	HEALTH	868	27.6%	FOOD	193	6.0%	ACTIVITY	378	12.0%	MUSIC	78	2.5%			
2	HOTEL	2588	82.4%	POOL	5	43.1%	HEALTHY	9	6.4%	WALK	228	7.3%	ART	54	1.7%	BIKE	208	6.9%	SHOP	72	2.3%			
3	STAFF	2465	76.5%	MASSAGE	496	15.8%	THERAPIST	10	3.2%	GLIDE	235	8.1%	HISTORY	45	1.4%	DINNER	627	20.0%	GYM	143	4.6%	PARTY	51	1.6%
4	RESTAURANT	1117	35.6%	TREATMENT	482	15.3%	HEALTH	95	3.0%	MOUNTAIN	222	7.1%	TRADITIONAL	44	1.4%	MEAL	407	13.0%	COURSE	137	4.4%	EVENT	45	1.4%
5	VILLA	400	12.7%	WELLNESS	277	8.8%	AYURVEDIC	48	1.5%	GAME	170	5.4%	DEEP	44	1.4%	VILLAGE	33	1.1%	EXCURSION	60	1.9%	STORE	28	0.9%
6	TEAM	372	11.8%	SHOWER	221	7.0%	CHINESE	38	1.2%	ISLAND	164	5.2%	SPIRITUAL	22	0.7%	WINE	200	6.2%	SNORKEL	56	1.8%	MOVIE	27	0.9%
7	BAR	371	11.8%	SWIM	157	5.0%	MEDICAL	34	1.1%	NATURE	157	5.0%	STORY	24	0.8%	LUNCH	288	9.2%	TRAIL	50	1.6%	ENTERTAINME	26	0.8%
8	SUITE	251	8.0%	HOT SPRING	123	3.9%	PATIENT	23	0.7%	SEA	133	4.9%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%	BOULIQUE	22	0.7%
9	RECEPTION	206	6.6%	BATH	119	3.8%	ANIMAL	151	4.8%	BEACH	171	5.4%	BIKE	46	1.5%	DRINK	219	7.0%	ADVENTURE	48	1.5%			
10	BATHROOM	204	6.5%	TUB	110	3.5%	RAVER	139	4.4%	VALLEY	131	4.2%	LOCAL	179	5.7%	TRAINING	43	1.4%						
11	GARDEN	188	6.0%	SWIMMING POOL	100	3.2%	OCEAN	135	4.2%	VALLEY	131	4.2%	OCEAN	135	4.2%	SKI	41	1.3%						
12	BERGOM	123	3.9%	LUNSS	98	3.1%	PARK	121	3.9%	PARK	121	3.9%	ELPHANT	94	3.0%	COFFEE	124	3.9%	TENNIS	40	1.3%			
13	HOUSEKEEPIN	111	3.5%	SAUNA	87	2.8%	ELPHANT	94	3.0%	ELPHANT	94	3.0%	COCKTAIL	94	3.0%	BIKING	30	1.0%						
14	HOUSEKEEPIN	111	3.5%	SAUNA	87	2.8%	ELPHANT	94	3.0%	ELPHANT	94	3.0%	COCKTAIL	94	3.0%	BIKING	30	1.0%						
15	HOUSEKEEPIN	111	3.5%	SAUNA	87	2.8%	ELPHANT	94	3.0%	ELPHANT	94	3.0%	COCKTAIL	94	3.0%	BIKING	30	1.0%						
16	THRACU	98	3.0%	PANOR	66	2.1%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
17	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
18	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
19	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
20	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
21	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
22	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
23	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
24	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
25	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
26	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
27	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
28	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
29	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
30	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
31	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
32	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
33	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
34	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
35	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
36	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
37	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
38	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
39	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
40	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
41	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
42	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
43	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
44	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
45	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
46	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
47	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
48	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
49	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
50	THRACU	98	3.0%	THRACU	98	3.0%	ENHORNME	81	2.6%	NATURE	157	5.0%	CASTLE	23	0.7%	CHEF	254	8.1%	SPORT	48	1.5%			
		1527	3		453	0		844	5		873	340		377	21		152	2			384			

Table A1.
The components perceived as relevant in wellness tourism experiences

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