

Suggesting a framework for innovation management in the industry of wellness tourism and spas

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Abstract

The issue of developing experience innovations in the field of tourism in general and in the industry of wellness tourism and spas in particular, is of crucial importance in today's competitive business environment. The analysis of innovations might be approached from two perspectives i.e. demand (consumer experience) or supply (business offering). This article adopts the latter approach without neglecting the former, implying a hybrid approach. The article's focus is on consumers-driven innovation. Hence, the paper's main aim is to develop and suggest a framework for innovation management in wellness tourism and spas. To attain this aim, the study takes a strategic management perspective and is based upon an extensive literature review. It is estimated that this study would encourage wellness tourism providers to address new demands by consumers and customize their offering.

Keywords: Wellness tourism & spas, consumer experience, business offering, customer-driven innovations, innovation management.

Introduction

Tourism is an activity performed by persons visiting destinations and attractions for leisure, business, health or other purposes. These actors are always on a quest for special and rewarding experiences. In reality, all tourist practices and activities are the expression of human needs and desires, inspirations and requirements, of a lifestyle within the social and economic context. Likewise, tourism destinations and businesses are constantly looking for creating, managing and marketing valuable and authentic experience opportunities for their visitors and guests. Within this context, there is an imperative need to better understand tourists' behaviour in terms of demands, expectations and desires, and to properly address and meet them (Otto & Brent Ritchie, 1996; Moutinho, Ballantyne & Rate, 2011).

In simple terms, innovation refers to the introduction of new products/services, new production processes, supply chain links, managerial revisions, and communication changes. The important categories of driving forces that materialize for organizations as incentives in innovation processes in tourism businesses include research, consumers, technology and suppliers. The current analysis focuses on a consumer-centric approach within the context of the wellness tourism and spa industry.

The present study argues that an appropriate analysis of consumer experience, within the context of its interaction and relationship with the business offering environment could

encourage wellness tourism and spa providers to develop new ideas and innovations. The main contribution of this study is to propose a framework for innovation management in wellness tourism and spa services by suggesting (i) areas offering innovation potential and opportunities, and (ii) methods adequate to be used in acquiring tourists' knowledge and input.

The remainder of this paper is structured into four sections. The first section outlines the issue of innovations, highlighting the various types and is of particular significance in the tourism field. The second section deals with tourists' experience of wellness tourism and spas. It provides an analysis of (i) the business context and environment in which the wellness tourism and spa industry operates, and (ii) the interaction between the business offering and the consumer experience in wellness and spa operations. It is believed that this analysis is an efficient way to identify areas offering innovation opportunities for wellness tourism providers. The third section then presents the study's suggestions for an innovation management framework. It proposes business functions and performance areas offering innovation opportunities, and appropriate methods to acquire customer knowledge and input for innovation purposes. The study will be completed by presenting some concluding remarks, the study's limitations and possible avenues for future research.

Innovation

Nowadays, innovation is one of the top priorities in the business field, offering significant benefits and competitive advantages. Innovation has been defined as "the creation of better or more effective products, processes, services, technologies, or ideas that are accepted by society, markets, and government" (Hjalager, 2011:127).

The various types of innovation

According to Drucker (1985), innovation is the tool of entrepreneurs by which they exploit change as an opportunity. Innovation outputs can either be new ways of doing things, or the development of new products, services, or techniques (Porter, 1990). The three main types of innovation are process, organizational and marketing innovation, briefly outlined below.

Process innovation

One of the most widely accepted types of innovation is process innovation (Camisón & Villar-López, 2014). According to Bunduchi *et al.* (2011), process innovations can be characterised as new methods of producing and/or delivering products and services. Literature suggests that the most commonly used approach to categorize the benefits associated with process innovation is according to their significance (Bunduchi & Smart, 2010). This approach classifies benefits into three categories: (i) direct benefits from the enhanced transmission of information and the consequent cost savings from minimized document handling; (ii) indirect benefits from enhanced efficiency within the company, and improved relationships with customers and suppliers, and (iii) strategic benefits that are related to the ability to forge closer business bonds with suppliers and associates (Bunduchi & Smart, 2010; Bunduchi *et al.*, 2011).

Organizational innovation

The most comprehensive and accepted definition of organizational innovation is the one suggested by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005), who defined it as the introduction of new organizational methods for business management in the workplace and/or in the relationship between an organization and external associates. With regards to the positive outcomes of organizational innovation, it provides a challenging and satisfying work environment which leads to enhanced job satisfaction and self-fulfilment

by staff members, whereby employee retention is improved (Mazzanti *et al.*, 2006; Simpson *et al.*, 2006). A practical example would be if a company has customer-minded employees with long experience on customer care.

Marketing innovation

Within the marketing literature, marketing innovation has been placed as a type of incremental innovation. The OECD (2005) defines marketing innovation as the effectuation of new marketing methods involving important changes in packaging, product design, promotion, pricing or placement. The benefits associated with marketing innovation include better ways of targeting and addressing customer needs, opening up new markets, or differentiating a company's product or service in the market with the intention of increasing sales performance (Gunday *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, marketing innovation could assist in the development of new marketing tools and methods for targeting consumers more efficiently (Chen, 2006).

Innovations in the tourism industry

Literature suggests that innovation in tourism is much more than the introduction of a new service; it may also be a new way to produce or organize a service, or a better link to suppliers (Hjalager, 2011). Additionally, tourism innovation is predominantly a people process. Consumers, suppliers, and business partners possess a wealth of knowledge. Strategic innovation in tourism is about tapping that knowledge, interpreting the information and recycling it in new contexts. The challenge is for tourism businesses and managers to devote the resources to transform knowledge acquired into more systematic, strategic processes (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011).

The important categories of driving forces that materialize for organizations as incentives in innovation processes in tourism businesses include: research, tourists, technology, suppliers, price and cost, and employees (Jiménez-Zarco *et al.*, 2011). The focus of the analysis in this article is on tourists. Hjalager and Nordin (2011) argue that the active exchange of ideas and resources with tourists may facilitate and benefit the learning process, enhance innovation capacities and ultimately increase the competitiveness of organizations. Nowadays, consumers' input plays a central role as a driving force determining the direction and extent of innovative activity (Oberg, 2010; Pynnonen, Hallikas & Ritala, 2012). The analysis of the wellness tourism and spas experience contribute to better apprehend them. However, before moving on, it seems useful to briefly present the business environment and the issue of innovation in the field of wellness tourism and spas.

Wellness tourism and spas: business environment

Tourism and travel are very much a part of the 'experience economy' and the design, staging, marketing and evaluation of the experience has become an important part of tourism services design (Zehrer, 2009). The term 'experience economy' was first described by Pine and Gilmore (1998). In this article they described the experience economy as the next economy following the service economy, "an economy in which many goods and services are sold by emphasizing the effect they can have on people's lives" (Cambridge Business English Dictionary, 2015). Pine and Gilmore argued that businesses must orchestrate memorable events for their customers, and that memory itself becomes the product — the 'experience'. As the business environment moves from the service economy to the experience economy, it is imperative for all tourism providers to focus on analysing and gaining insights to the consumption experience; in other words it is crucial to properly listen and fully apprehend the tourists' needs and requirements. Moutinho *et al.* (2011) contend that tourist consumers want their real experiences reflected and connected to their very specific and personal needs.

Tourist satisfaction depends on the quality of experience and there is no doubt about the importance of this issue in today's business environment.

This emergence of quality conscious tourists leads to a greater pressure on wellness tourism providers. Nowadays, core values of society, health and wellbeing impact on all aspects of our lives, and have also increasingly influenced worldwide patterns of tourism consumption and production. In this context, wellness has developed into a significant dimension of tourism in a number of new and long established destinations (Smith & Puczko, 2009). It is consistently referred to as the most rapidly growing segment of the tourism and leisure industries (Bodeker & Cohen, 2008). Wellness tourism is, in many ways, one of the most ancient forms of tourism if one considers the scrupulous attention paid to wellbeing by the Romans and Greeks, the quests for spiritual enlightenment of Mediaeval Pilgrims, or the medical seaside and spa tourism of the 18th and 19th Century European aristocracy (ATLAS Special Interest Group, 2011). However, there has been intensification in the pursuit of wellness in the history of tourism in recent years; the proliferation of wellness centres, holistic retreats and spas is unprecedented. In 2013, the size of the global wellness and spa industry amounted to more than 3.4 trillion U.S. dollars, with wellness and spa tourism expected to grow to 680 billion U.S. dollars by 2017 (Statista, 2015).

The International Spa Association (2010) defines spas as “places devoted to overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit”. The term ‘spa’ is associated with water treatment, also known as balneotherapy (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). Spas typically offer various health treatments, the main types being: Ayurveda spa, club spa resort/hotel spa, day spa, destination spa, medical spa and mineral springs’ spa (Bodeker & Cohen, 2008; Smith & Puczko, 2009; ATLAS Special Interest Group 2011). Spa products are often based on regional resources, including local and indigenous treatments and traditions, mineral water sources, seas, rivers, or mountains (Smith & Puczko, 2009).

Wellness and spa centres offer relaxation, escapism, wellness services and cosmetic treatments. One of the trends in the wellness and spa experience, and most probably the main purpose served by this experience, is feeling emotionally content and healthy, and looking physically beautiful and fit (Bakker, 2005). On the other hand, the wellness tourism industry is fragmented and made up predominantly of small businesses and entrepreneurs. This has implications for the level of management competence in this field, the ability of the wellness tourism industry to innovate, and above all, to invest in new products and ideas. There are many opportunities for innovation within the wellness tourism and spa industry, as discussed in the next section.

Innovations in wellness and spas

What comes to mind when thinking of ‘innovation’ in the wellness tourism and spa industry? This subsection outlines a series of potential innovations in this industry, classified according to the three types of innovation, namely process, organizational and marketing. Table 1 summarizes practical examples of good practices and innovations in wellness and spas suggested by this study, based on related literature and business practice (Lin, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Sotiriadis, 2016).

Table 1. Examples of good practices and innovations in wellness tourism and spas

Type of innovation	General aim and field in wellness and spas	Examples of good practices and innovations in wellness and spas
Process	Setting of and compliance to hygiene and safety standards.	The Bellanina Institute, Day Spa and Gift Boutique follow a self-designed Safety and Sanitation guide, purposefully set up for the in-house employees. This guide exceeds current industry regulatory standards.
	Technical equipment and technology susceptible to meet the experience's promise.	Allied Beauty Experts (ABE) are committed to keeping industry members updated on the latest spa equipment and trends, an activity outsourced to companies possessing the required expertise.
	Continuous monitoring and improvement of tangible elements of offering (architecture and design to create harmony and balance within the space).	In Hawaii, volcanic clay has long been incorporated in spa treatments as it is indigenous to the island. At the Mauna Lani Resort Spa, Hawaii, USA, guests can enjoy an open-air lava sauna while covered in sulphurous mud, or relax in the meditation hale and Watsu pool. The spa also offers other indigenous baths, treatments and therapies.
	Atmosphere and ambience linked to hygiene and therapeutic process.	SHA Wellness Clinic Medical Spa Resort, Spain combined a number of creative designs, resulting in a functional layout while maintaining a therapeutic ambience. This resort "... has a Zen, Mediterranean and tropical gardens; indoor and outdoor swimming pools, waterfalls, numerous relaxation areas... The large, open spaces of each building, combined in perfect harmony with the most innovative design, are laid out in the most intuitive and comfortable way to make you really feel at home." (SHA Wellness Clinic, 2015).
	Reconsider functionality and décor to add a sense of relaxation, health and cleanliness to customers.	
Organizational	Improved/empowered work environment	Mangwanani Spa, South Africa, offers a 'Staff Wellness Programme' which provides assistance to staff who suffer from a range of personal concerns; it was implemented to empower employees.
	Consider human resources as an investment (not only operating costs)	Williams Island, Florida, USA, recognizes the importance of personnel to a spa, its service delivery and client satisfaction, embracing staff as assets who increase the value of the business.
	Reprocessing/adequate design of treatments	Lefay Resort & Spa Lago di Garda, Italy, uses innovative methods by combining western scientific research with ancient Chinese medicine. Treatments range from medical to relaxation, including acupuncture, reflexology and aromatic body wraps.
	Continuous improvement of human resources' expertise and know-how (skills and capabilities).	The Bellanina Institute offers online 'Continuing Education' courses, where qualified wellness and spa employees can continuously learn new skills and treatments. This service is offered to in-house employees. It is also outsourced to other institutions.
Marketing	Move to specialization, customized / thematic and signature treatments.	The Sacher Spa in Wien, Austria, offers signature chocolate treatments and spa packages.
	Packaging and offering of opportunities for a variety of treatments and adequate products (for instance, anti-ageing and result-oriented treatments).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Villa Stephanie, the resident spa at Brenners Park-Hotel & Spa, Germany, offers a variety of packages, breaks and treatments, ranging from weight loss programs to organic, vitality and medical detox retreats. - The Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa in Cape Town, South Africa, offers spa treatments focusing on combining modern expertise with principles of ancient wisdom in order to restore and nurture customers' minds and bodies.
	Built up an attractive menu of treatments suitable to targeted market segment.	The Farm, Philippines, has positioned itself as a 'back-to-nature' treatment facility, offering detoxifying treatments, emotional guidance and nutritious raw food to their selected target market. They offer various treatments and anti-aging therapies.
	Adopt new approaches and use innovative tools in communicating with selected market segments.	Villa Stephanie, Brenners Park-Hotel & Spa, Germany, communicates their 'highlight offers' to their target markets by interacting with their target market on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TripAdvisor and YouTube.

Sources: Compiled from Allied Beauty Experts (2015), Bellanina Institute (2015), Health and Fitness Travel (2015), Hotel Sacher (2015), Lefay Resorts SRL (2015), Mangwanani (2015), Mauna Lani Bay (2015), Oetker Hotel Management Company (2015), and SHA Wellness Clinic (2015)

An efficient way for wellness and spa providers to address the issue of innovation is to really listen and understand their customers. Customers who are carefully attended and monitored can be a goldmine of information and can lead to changes in products, services and processes (Oberg, 2010). Furthermore, along the same line, it is believed that the appropriate analysis of the wellness and spas experience is significantly useful.

The Experience Context in Wellness and Spas

This section deals with an analysis of the wellness tourism and spas experience. The present study argues that the analysis of interaction between business offering and consumer experience could allow developing a managerial approach to innovations in wellness and spas.

Wellness tourism and spas experience

The wellness experience includes feeling emotionally content and healthy, and looking physically beautiful. Therefore, wellness tourism and spa services closely involve and highly interact with an individual's body and senses. These services focus heavily on sensory value and induce customers' perception and emotions, determining the overall experience (Bakker, 2005). An empirical research/field survey was conducted in 2012 aiming at exploring issues, such as tourists' motivations and business offering of wellness and spas services in Crete, Greece, a well-established holiday destination (Sotiriadis, 2016). This empirical study confirmed the general motivations for this type of consumption, suggested by literature (Smith & Kelly, 2006; Bodeker & Cohen, 2008; Chen, Prebensen & Huan, 2008; Ellis, 2008), namely: (i) an increased orientation to a healthy and aesthetic body, (ii) a general desire for a healthier lifestyle (healthy nutrition), (iii) the quest for spiritual experiences (meditation and yoga), (iv) the pursuit of happiness (as perceived by everyone), (v) the desire to look 'sexier' and healthier, and (vi) an increasing demand for non-surgical treatments. Furthermore, customers of wellness and spa centres gain experience and have particularly high requirements. More specifically, they have the following characteristics: (i) a life full of intense anxiety, workload and insecurity; (ii) look for more intensive experiences of relaxation and rejuvenation; (iii) a wish to restore a balance between work and private life, thus improving quality of life; (iv) a high disposable income and willingness to reward themselves by visiting a wellness and spa centre; (v) requirements to enjoy personal service and care, cleanliness, hygiene and a pleasant atmosphere, reasonable waiting time for using equipment and facilities, and finally, continuous presence and support by skilful staff. A sub-segment of clientele has specific goals, expecting precise results, such as loss of weight, coping with their health disturbances, and the desire to stop smoking.

The above briefly presented profile of wellness tourists, along with the business environment, set out a pressure on wellness tourism providers to constantly evolve and be innovative. Furthermore, there is a growing pressure on wellness and spa centres to understand the needs and requirements of customers and adopt innovative thinking and approaches in order to offer new products and services to current and potential clientele. An analysis of the interaction between the business offering and tourists' experience could contribute to identifying areas offering innovation opportunities in terms of products, services and processes. This is discussed in the following subsection.

Relationship and interaction between tourists' experience and the business offering environment in the wellness tourism and spa industry

The approach adopted by this paper to identify possible areas providing innovation opportunities is to analyse the relationship and interaction between tourists' experience and the business offering environment. This interaction leads to an outcome, the perceived experiential value; meaning the value that is provided by satisfying tourists' needs and requirements. Smith and Colgate (2007) argue that experiential value derived from either direct usage or appreciation of goods or services, and how a service creates preferential experiences, feelings and emotions in a customer. The customer-business offering environment interaction stems from the environment consisting of both physical and social variables existing in reciprocal relationships with customer's behaviour (Veitch & Arkkelin, 1995). Scholars (Lin & Worthley, 2012) suggest that consumers respond not only to the changing circumstances, but also by virtue of their individual differences. It is also suggested that an individual's satisfaction from a consumption experience is not based on a single stimulus, and that customers receive a variety of stimuli throughout the entire experience (Smith 2003). These holistic images then serve to satisfy customer expectations and needs. Therefore, tourists holistically evaluate consumption experiences (Lin, 2010).

The focal issue in a consumption experience is 'experiential value', as it is perceived by consumers. Mathwick *et al.* (2001) indicate that experiential value results from the consumption experience and the feelings, emotions and preferences created in the mind of a consumer.

The experiential value is also defined as consumer return on investment, service excellence, escapism and aesthetic appeal (Mathwick *et al.*, 2001). Wellness and spa services focus heavily on and interact highly with the body and senses. Hence, the consumers' overall experience includes perceptions, sensations and feelings. Specifically, it might be stressed that the factors determining the wellness tourists' perceived experiential value are essentially the four components of experience, mainly from a business offering perspective, namely: (i) business facility, location and surrounding environment; (ii) servicescape; (iii) service encounter (customer-employees interaction) and (iv) human senses/sensations (created by all senses). Below, these four components are briefly consider.

Business facility, location and surrounding environment are considered to be fundamental factors and valuable assets to wellness tourism operations. The business facility, location and environment allow wellness tourism providers to adopt their product and service development and design (Cooper, 2009). The surrounding environment and the whole setting might be natural (based on natural resources) or 'created'/artificial, in a built form.

Servicescape encompasses the physical facilities and amenities of tourism providers where service transactions occur. Scholars stressed that a servicescape plays an important antecedent role to consumers' emotional responses, feelings and behaviour (Bitner, 1992). In wellness and spa operations, this servicescape is divided into different zones (active, buffer, and quiet zone). Obviously the wellness tourists will perceive, retrieve, appraise, and adapt to the different stimuli from each zone.

The service encounter can be defined as any interaction that the customer may have with the service organization/tourism business (i.e., service staff, service delivery and servicescape) throughout his/her entire experience. It is estimated that the quality of the service encounter is greatly dependent on human resources. Staff at all levels must possess the appropriate capabilities, know-how and expertise and provide on-going care and support to consumers (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2008).

Lastly, the forth component is *human senses/sensations*. The human senses serve as the basis for all interactions between individuals and their surrounding environment (Schifferstein, 2010). All human senses (thought, sight, sound, touch, taste and smell) have interactive

effects on an individual’s perception, emotions and feelings. These senses can be used to design and create sensory appeals, to improve wellness experience and communications. These sensations constitute a crucial factor in wellness tourism and spas services because of their particular nature.

All four abovementioned components are interrelated and have an impact on wellness tourists’ consumption experience and satisfaction. Figure 1 depicts an attempt to interrelate the experiential strategic marketing approach (encompassing five constructs/appeals), suggested by Schmitt (1999), and the wellness consumer-business offering interaction (constituted of four determining factors).

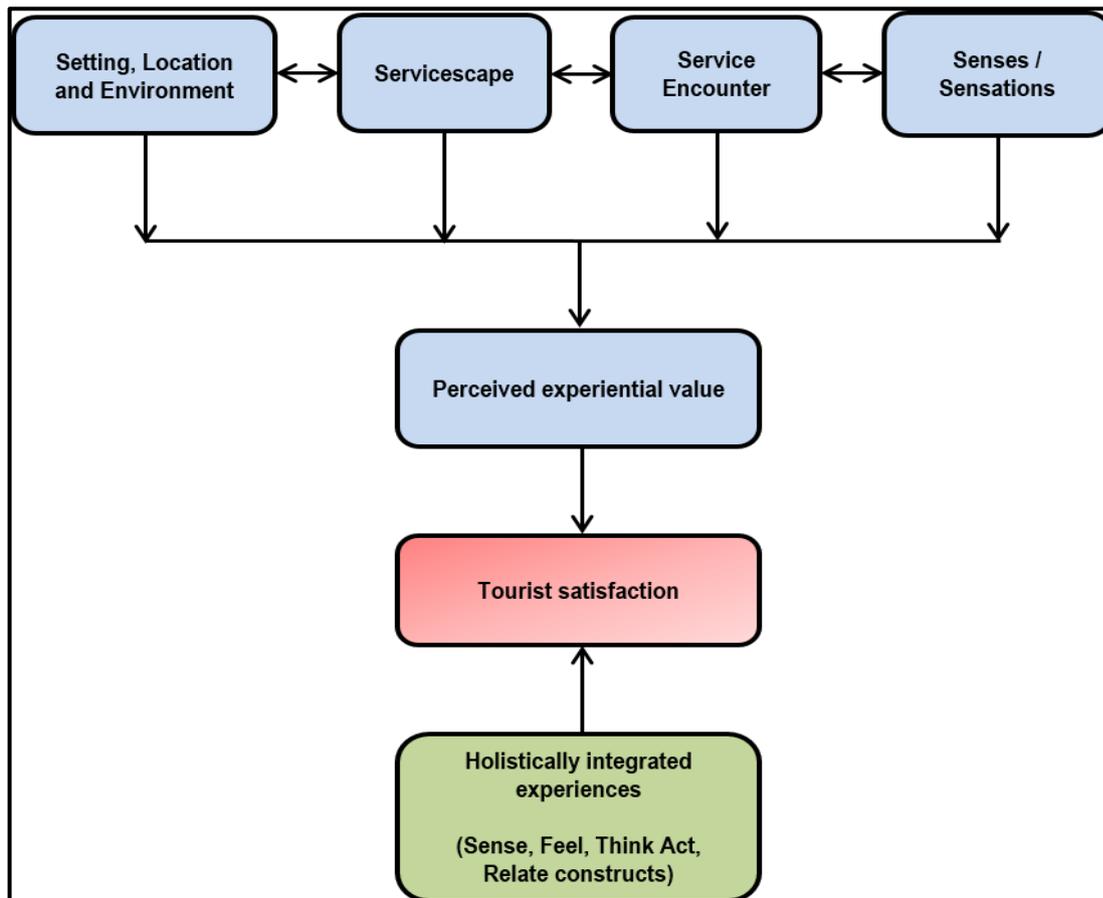


Figure 1. The interrelation between consumer-business offering interaction and experiential strategic marketing

Obviously, the whole consumption experience will be evaluated by wellness tourists and lead to satisfaction (or dissatisfaction). Scholars suggest that experiential constructs and perceived experiential value have an impact on tourists’ satisfaction and is a direct antecedent of his/her satisfaction (Wu & Liang, 2009).

From the above analysis, it is apparent that innovation in wellness tourism and spas constitutes a multi-function management field. Innovation management, if it is to be successful, requires a strategic approach and a comprehensive operational implementation in all related areas, namely (i) business offering: facility, location and environment, servicescape, service encounter and human senses/sensations; (ii) operations: all supporting systems and processes; (iii) integrated marketing communications (aiming at designing and offering integrated multi-appeals experiences to delight tourists).

All three areas influence wellness tourists' perceived experiential value and determine their level of satisfaction. Hence, it might be stressed that this study moves on from the classification of innovations into types to consider the business functions and performance areas offering potential for innovation. Thus, the three areas might constitute the basis of a framework for innovation management in wellness tourism, as it is proposed in the following section.

A Suggested Framework

This section deals with innovation management in wellness tourism and spas services. Based on the previous analysis, it attempts to suggest (i) areas offering innovation potential and opportunities, and (ii) methods adequate for acquiring tourists' knowledge and input to foster innovation.

In simple terms, innovation refers to the use of a new idea or method (Hjalager, 2011:127). The practice of listening to and learning from the consumers when delivering a service is extensively acclaimed in the field of business (Oberg, 2010; Pynnonen *et al.*, 2012) and the tourism industry (Pechlaner *et al.*, 2005). The involvement of tourists as informants, however, often seems to be coincidental and unsystematic. Usually, tourism companies and organizations do not employ distinctive and methodically organized approaches to tap ideas and inspiration from their customers (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011).

It is estimated that there are four components of innovation management in wellness tourism and spas, namely (i) business areas/fields, (ii) corresponding challenges to be addressed, (iii) elements to be managed, and (iv) the systems and tools providing support to this managerial task. In Figure 2 the integrated approach of these components constituting a framework for innovation management is illustrated. The next section considers how wellness tourism providers might approach this issue.

Business functions/areas offering innovation opportunities

As it has been identified by the previous analysis, there are three main areas offering innovation potential: business offering, operations (operating procedures) and marketing. Examples of good practices by wellness and spa organisations implementing innovations in these areas have also been provided (see Table 1). These areas must be interlinked into an integrated management approach. Furthermore, there are two challenges to be addressed: (i) management must establish a favourable background to innovation activities, and (ii) the determining role of human resources of an organization as an enabler and facilitator in delivering services properly. An appropriate organizational culture and climate are needed to enhance the strategic management of innovation, involving incorporation of tourists' satisfaction into the organizational culture.

Business offering: service quality and tourists' satisfaction

Service quality: elements and dimensions. Quality of services is defined as "the relationship between planned services (objective); services provided (outcome) and the customers' perceived performance based on their expectations" (Sotiriadis, 2011:10). The customers' image of service quality is a function of two elements, namely (i) technical quality (it encompasses know-how, machines/equipment and product) and (ii) functional quality (the way the service is delivered, thus it consists of the attitudes and behaviour of staff). Additionally, Zeitham *et al.* (1990) suggest that the criteria used by customers in moulding their expectations and perceptions fit into five dimensions of service quality, namely: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It is also estimated that

intangible and emotional elements are important to tourists' perceptions. Subjective, affective and experiential factors comprise a substantial portion of tourists' satisfaction with wellness and spa services (Otto & Brent Ritchie, 1996).

Therefore, no matter how much effort is placed into providing quality service in the wellness tourism and spa industry, the true test lies in consumers' perception. To assess this perception, managers have to adopt approaches for monitoring service provision and use appropriate tools.

Management of tourists' satisfaction: In wellness tourism and spa experiences, customers participate in the process of providing this experience. Furthermore, the wellness tourism and spas experience has two main features, namely (i) staff-customer interaction, which is a major part of the total experience; and (ii) the operational processes, which are not subject to standardization. That is the reason why the perception of tourists, direct and indirect, of the organization and of its services must be properly managed. Literature has well documented the importance of monitoring information on customer satisfaction as a measure of system performance (Zeitham et al., 1990; Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2008).

A wellness and spa organization must focus on customer perceived quality in all aspects of the organization's operations. It must also be entirely customer driven, meaning (i) it embraces a strategy for listening to customers, which enables the management to explore customers' ideas and suggestions; and (ii) it represents continual improvement of process and customer satisfaction. Examples of process innovations were provided in Table 1.

Operations: operating procedures and human resources

Service delivery processes: The challenge in this area is the stimulation of innovation and creativity in wellness and spa process improvement. There is a need for an organizational structure capable of catering to wellness tourists' needs, and adequate management of all the value-adding activities within the organization. This involves (i) identifying key processes, (ii) systematic management of key and support processes, and (iii) reviewing of processes based on performance parameters to improve them, as well as on customers' ideas to innovate.

Therefore, the issue is the adequate analysis of design and processes involved in delivering the service experience (Zehrer, 2009). It is about continuous improvement to meet the clientele's needs. This is carried out by a detailed design of operations with two key characteristics: (i) focus on customers and staff members, and (ii) focus more on behaviour and less on technology. The management task is equally the monitoring of the actual performance in wellness service delivery processes to ensure that they meet specifications determined by management and promised to customers. Information and communication technology equipment has given way to myriads of process (Haijaler, 2011; Pynnonen et al., 2012) and organizational innovations, examples of which were provided in Table

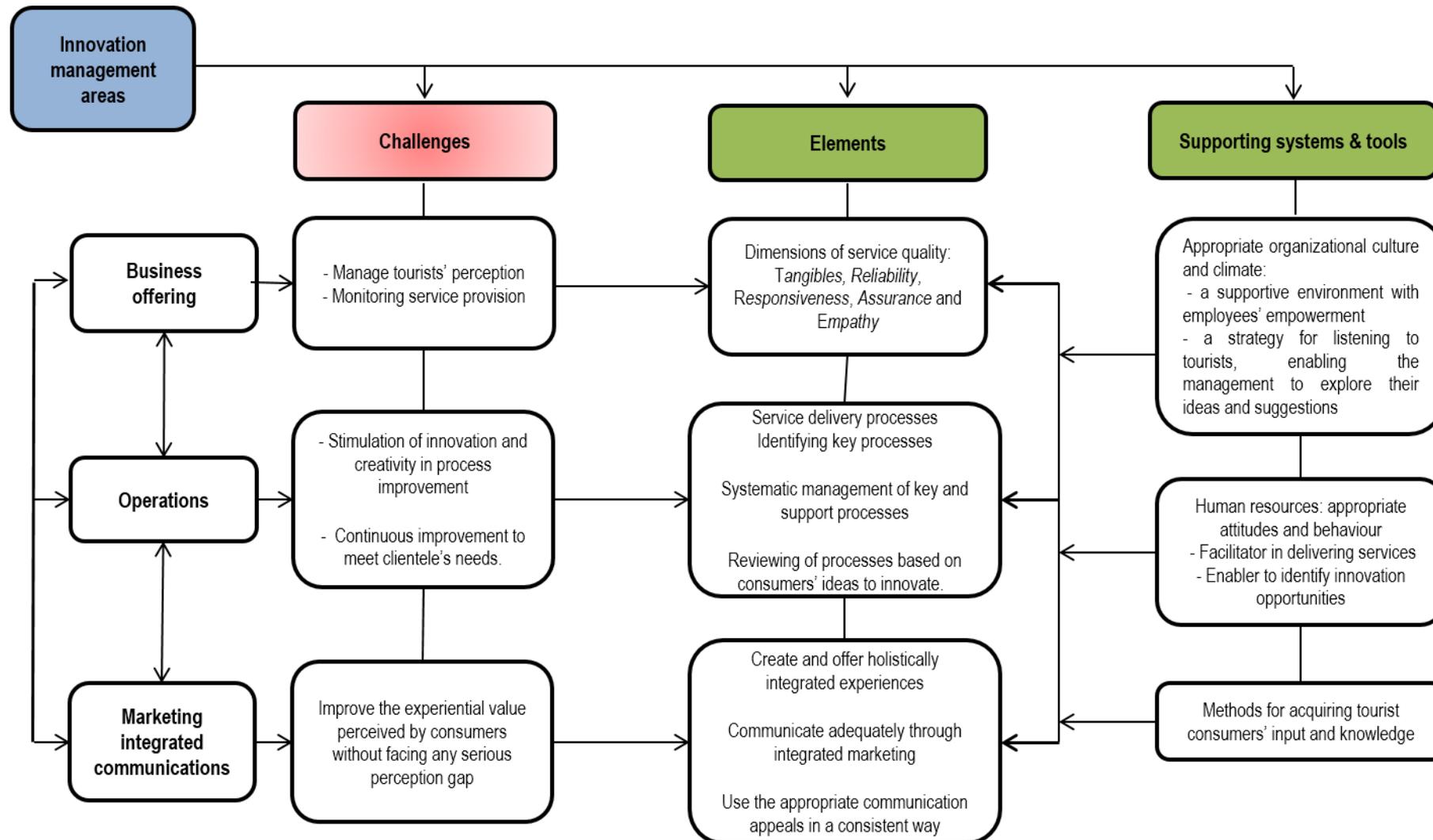


Figure 2. Innovation management in the wellness tourism and spas industry: areas, challenges, elements and supporting systems & tools

Operations and Human Resources

Employees are one of the key elements in the operation of a successful wellness and spa business. The success of any operational strategy depends mainly on the human resources and its appropriate attitudes and behaviour (Lashley, 2001). Employees' involvement in the wellness tourism and spas industry is crucial in the development of any innovation and service improvement. They constitute enablers to identify innovation opportunities in wellness tourism services. Hence, there is an imperative for creating a climate for innovation and this would be the cornerstone of the successful implementation of innovations. Management should provide a supportive environment where employees feel empowered, involving the willingness and ability of staff to respond and adapt to demands and requirements of customers (Davidson, 2003).

Marketing: integrated communications

Wellness tourism businesses have to design, create and offer holistically integrated experiences. Hence, they are in a better position to communicate adequately with their market through integrated marketing actions, whereof examples were provided in Table 1. The issue is to conceive and communicate the right messages to their target segments (Schmitt, 1999 and 2003). Additionally, they have to use the appropriate communication appeals with the market in a consistent way. These marketing communications must be based upon a background, the business offering and the adequate operations management (Sotiriadis, 2011). In doing so, wellness tourism and spa providers can meet experience promise and requirements of customers as well; they are in a better position to improve the experiential value perceived by tourists. From the above synoptic presentation it is quite evident that innovation is not an easy managerial task at all. The next section will deal with methods that could be used to facilitate this task.

Methods and techniques for customer-driven innovation in a wellness and spas context

As it has been already mentioned, carefully monitored tourists can be a goldmine of information that can lead to changes in products, services and processes. Customer feedback "refers to the transmission of negative (complaints) or positive information (compliments) to providers about the services used" (Saha & Theingi, 2009: 354). Such information can be useful for service providers in identifying areas where adjustments are required or new offers may be introduced. An interesting study performed by Hjalager and Nordin (2011) addressed the nature and intensity of the dialogue between organizations and their consumers in the innovation field. These authors define the user-driven innovation as "the phenomenon where new products, services, concepts, processes, distribution systems, marketing methods, etc. are inspired by or are the results of needs, ideas and opinions derived from external purchasers or users. User-driven innovation involves existing and/or potential users, and the processes rely on systematic activities that search for, acknowledge, tap, and understand the users' explicit, as well as implicit, knowledge and ideas." (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011: 290). Consumer-driven innovation is a term which is almost synonymous with user-driven innovation. It is suggested that tourists may provide organizations with input and knowledge that could be used to develop new concepts and improve processes. The same authors performed an extensive literature review on user-driven innovation and established a typology of methods (Hjalager & Nordin, 2011: 292). Generally all methods have drawbacks and limitations. The methods considered to be the most suitable for wellness tourism and spas industry are five: consumer surveys, unsolicited complaints, critical incident interviews, observations, and user panels.

In completing this section, it is worth indicating some important points/aspects. There is no perfect method; as mentioned above, all of them encompass drawbacks and limitations. However, methods and techniques for wellness and spa tourists-driven innovation should be in

place to monitor their expectations. It is generally accepted that wellness and spa tourist consumer-driven innovation implies the application of an appropriate method and the systematic collection of reliable data. The perception gap (actual service delivery compared to perceived service delivery) may be monitored by tourist satisfaction questionnaires, or by market research surveys. However, the crucial point is the design of such surveys. If systematically designed, carried out and analysed, any of these methods of acquiring wellness tourists' knowledge and input should provide business management with a rich source of data for the improvement of the wellness offering and experience. Furthermore, wellness tourists' feedback is a critical raw material for management although further reflection, investigation, development and implementation are necessary.

Conclusion

Using knowledge, input and feedback from customers in product and service development is an explicitly or implicitly recognized mode of acquiring valuable knowledge and information in the tourism industry. This study attempted to suggest a framework for innovation management in the industry of wellness tourism and spas. This framework encompasses the business areas offering innovation potential, as well as the methods of wellness tourist consumer-driven innovation. The study's aim has been attained by an analysis of the consumption experience and the business offering in wellness tourism and spa operations. The current study firstly highlighted that the task to foster innovation and harvest the derived benefits constitutes a requiring management task. Producing innovations in the wellness and spas business involves providing experiences reliably within an environment that meets the tourists' expectations, while simultaneously creating opportunities for adding value that will exceed expectations and result in satisfaction and repeat clientele or recommendations.

The four components of the business offering service system is the focus of wellness tourism and spas innovation feedback. It has been pointed out that the factors of wellness offering (facility, location and environment, servicescape, service encounter, and human senses/sensations) determine tourists' perceived experiential value and satisfaction degree. Therefore, all four constructs offer opportunities for innovations and the redesign of the wellness experience positively linked to meet new demands. Then, the analysis of interaction between the wellness tourists' experience and the business offering environment allowed us to identify the areas offering innovation potential, namely business offering, operations and processes, and marketing. The study also suggested five methods, namely consumer surveys, unsolicited complaints and critical incident interviews, which would fit most to the wellness tourism and spas industry. The forms of tourist-driven innovation provide an essential feedback loop that informs marketing and design processes, as well as wellness service-delivery processes. These methods are considered to be appropriate to harvest valuable ideas and inspiration from wellness tourists, bearing in mind that tourist consumer-driven innovation is generally experiential in its set-up.

In practice, it will often be necessary to combine wellness tourists' inputs with other types of knowledge acquisition and integrate these in a more comprehensive strategic process, where the ideas are carefully assessed before implementation. It is estimated that the wellness business areas offering innovation potential, along with the suggested methods of acquiring input and knowledge from tourists could form a framework for innovation management, as it has been outlined. The present study indicated that there are four components of innovation management in wellness tourism and spas, namely business areas, corresponding challenges to be addressed and elements to be managed, and the systems and tools providing support to this managerial task. The integrated approach of these elements constitutes a framework for innovation management in wellness tourism services; this is the main contribution of the present paper. This framework, as presented in this paper, enhances wellness tourism providers to

continuously develop innovations in alignment with current and potential wellness customer needs.

Limitations and future research

This study is a conceptual paper based on an in-depth literature review. Thus, the suggested framework must be tested and validated by empirical research. There is a need for empirical studies to refine the suggested framework and to advance research and knowledge in this area. Some suggestions can be made for future research. Future studies could explore issues such as (i) empirically investigate, validate and then finalize the suggested framework for innovation management in the wellness tourism and spas industry (ii) the methods preferred and implemented in customer-driven innovation in the wellness tourism and spas industry; (iii) the degree of involvement which wellness tourists are willing to participate in consumer-driven innovation activities; (iv) the quality of the outcome of tourist-driven innovation processes and the uses of this outcome in wellness tourism settings; (v) the feasibility of tourist-driven innovation processes in terms of investment and operation; and (vi) a comparative analysis of the wellness tourism and spas industry in various countries from different continents, for instance South Africa, France and Greece. The above studies and researches should provide with in-depth knowledge and more insights into the field of innovation within the context of wellness tourism and spas.

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