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**VISITOR'S EXPECTATIONS CREATED BY VISUAL
ELEMENTS ON A SPA WEBSITE BEFORE THE SPA
VISIT**

Master thesis

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This Master thesis has been compiled independently. All works by other authors used while compiling the thesis as well as principles and data from literary and other sources have been referred to.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
1. LITERATURE REVIEW	7
1.1 Online consumer behaviour.....	7
1.2 Tourism semiotics	9
1.3 Importance of expectations	14
1.4 Proposed framework of expectations	17
2. METHODOLOGY.....	23
2.1 Experimental research and selection of subjects	23
2.2 Diary driven questionnaires and their aim.....	26
2.3 Content analysis and data limitations	28
3. ANALYSIS.....	31
3.1 Subjects' background and previous experience	31
3.2 Diaries and primary research results	34
3.3 Analysis of the questionnaire answers	38
3.4 Results and recommendations for further research	45
CONCLUSION	49
REFERENCES.....	51
APPENDICES	58
Appendix 1: Introductory questions	58
Appendix 2: Diary	59
Appendix 3: Questionnaire.....	60
Appendix 4: The complete set of answers to Q20 and Q33	64
RESÜMEE	65

INTRODUCTION

Presenting one's self is a powerful aspect of any service and for customers, receiving a certain *image* of a service becomes a necessity in making ones' decisions. Nowadays, having a wide access to the Internet is most likely providing more opportunities to search for services and competitors and driven by the fact that the usage of the Internet has changed the behaviour of customers (Mattila, 2004), this research is aimed towards understanding how the process of browsing a website might influence a spa visitor before their visit. While the subject of spa service design primarily focuses on the onsite quality and properties that the spa visitor can experience, it is interesting to explore the service interaction of a customer before they actually arrive at the spa. As said, Internet usage has altered the minds of the customers (Mattila, 2004), so the author of this paper proposes an idea that the spa website is a crucial part of the spa service and should not be dismissed from the theoretical discussions. In other words, emphasizing the state of mind of a customer before the spa visit, the theoretical background of this research paper aims to achieve a better understanding of the spa service through the concept of *expectations*.

Though the Internet provides numerous opportunities to gain certain knowledge of services, the purpose of this research paper is to provide a precise insight into a more narrowed service encounter – a spa website. Indicating that the spa website is aimed towards presenting an image of the spa service in general, the information found on the spa website should create meanings to the potential customer through various visual elements (Gao & Bai, 2014). This idea leads to the hypothesis of this research paper: a spa's website creates a certain pre-understanding of the spa itself through visual elements, such as images, signs, text and colour, which lead to expectations formed prior to the spa visit. Therefore, the theoretical aim was to prove that website elements

carry certain meaning and through representation, that meaning is translated into expectations towards the service by an online consumer. The research paper accepted the fact that though theoretically, the hypothesis might have a positive conclusion, the experimental part of this paper, measuring those expectations, could not result in a successful outcome.

This research paper chose Strand Spa's website as its object based on random selection. But, as the focus of this paper is to understand the process of developing expectations via visual images and signs, the context in which these signs exist, this specific spa website, Strand Spa, is not paramount. Meaning, though the subjects of this research are aware of which spa website they are browsing, the overall results are not driven by the object itself but of its website elements. In other words, the analysis of this paper is motivated towards generalizing the results based on the Strand Spa website to achieve more universal theoretical findings.

Since the aim of the thesis is to determine how those visual elements create expectations and in turn factor into visitor's decision making the most, the primary literature needs to focus on something that will help to translate the theory into a specific process of analysing these findings. For this, numerous approaches need to be adapted and associated with one another in order to form a coherent understanding of all the relevant aspects of this paper. Some of the key theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter 1 will be online consumer behaviour, tourism semiotics, visual signs and images, representation of those signs and images that create meaning, and expectations. The main purpose of the literature review is to provide a general overview of each theoretical approach by developing a coherent background for understanding expectations. As previously mentioned, the specific spa website, Strand Spa, is not an essential part of the theoretical approach, because the more predominant factor of this paper is the selection of research subjects. Based on the literature review, there are various requirements for subjects derived from not only cultural and social background (Tsikriktsis, 2002; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Tresidder, 2011; Mazaheri et. al., 2014) but also from previous experiences (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Tresidder, 2011; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014). This means that the theoretical limitations minimize

the capacity of the research by requiring specific subjects which in turn might influence the final results.

After establishing a theoretical framework for the research paper, Chapter 2 will provide suitable methods than can be applied to the analysis of the collected data. Since the topic itself is a combination of various tourism related approaches, there are limitations to be considered while choosing the right methodology but the main methods will be introductory questions (Appendix 1) a diary (Appendix 2), a questionnaire (Appendix 3) and content analysis. Due to the theory of expectations and taking into account the methodology, this research paper is highly subjective (Kozak, 2001): not only are the results (Chapter 3.4) based on subjective answers provided by pre-chosen subjects but the process of analysis in its nature is also based on a qualitative method. Though a coded method of data collecting is possible by analysing the questionnaire answers, a better quantitative understanding could be based on website statistics, which the author of this paper was not able to receive.

Taking into account the complex nature of the literature review and the difficulty of adapting methods to the process of analysing the subjective data collected from the research subjects, the nature of this research is experimental. In other words, while the theory provides a solid framework of expectations in Chapter 1.4, the methodological limitations (Chapter 2.3) indicate that the results of this research may be inconclusive. Due to this, the author of this paper will provide recommendations for further data collecting and research possibilities in Chapter 3.4, specifically aimed towards recommending more conclusive methods in regards to the field of researching expectations via website elements among online consumers.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Online consumer behaviour

As the fundamental basis of this research is to understand how a customer prior to their visit to a spa creates expectations based on the elements found on a website, the core theoretical concept of this paper is consumer behaviour. More precisely, as websites' controllable elements, such as pictures, colours and text, contribute to the behavioural outcomes (Gao & Bai, 2014), the customer in this case should specifically be viewed as an online consumer. It is important to emphasize the fact that in case of this research paper, the online consumer is purposely viewed as a potential customer in relation to the expectations theory discussed in latter chapters.

For a better understanding of the online user, there are various characteristics that influence their general behaviour and those are based on individual, environmental, service, medium and intermediate determinants (Cheung, Chan & Limayem, 2005). A more in-depth framework lists total of nine attributes that influence the success of a website for the user which also include information quality and visual appearance (Park & Gretzel, 2007). Another important factor of a website is the fact whether it is easy to use because more complicated navigation may refer to distrust (Park & Gretzel, 2007; Gergori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014). Whilst most of these characteristics have been frequently studied, the effects of the medium characteristics, that impact such factors as trust, satisfaction or even expectations, are less explored (Cheung, Chan & Limayem, 2005; Park & Gretzel, 2007).

Online consumer behaviour has also been the topic of interest for tourism as the use of Internet technology and websites in that industry has grown since the mid 1990's (Milne, Mason & Hesse, 2004). More importantly, as the growing access to Internet has generated an interest towards the topic of tourism in relation to the consumer behaviour in general (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Ho, Lin & Chen, 2012; Gao & Bai, 2014), the attention towards online information search behaviour has increased as well (Ho, Lin & Chen, 2012). This indicates that the growth of Internet access has altered the behaviour of customers, who could also be viewed as online consumers, inside the tourism industry altogether (Mattila, 2004).

From the tourism aspect, such informational sources as Internet or a single website can create a pre-assumption or a pre-image of the destination (Frias et. al., 2012; Jeong et. al., 2012). Indicating that an online consumer behaves in a certain way due to visual representation via controllable factors (Gao & Bai, 2014) and therefore proving that there are specific outcomes that are individually formed by viewing, for instance, Strand Spa's website. Numerous studies of evaluating tourism websites have already been previously conducted, and the focus has primarily been about the website content, design and its effectiveness as well as user satisfaction with these particular websites (Ip, Law & Lee, 2011). Some of the outcomes in comparing these website studies from 1996 to 2009 include that the process of evaluating websites does not have a standard method, its nature is rather flexible and that in turn limits the process of generalisation of the results, and there is also a lack of actual statistical methods for website studies (Ip, Law & Lee, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013). Bottom line of Ip, Law & Lee's (2011) review is that there is room to improve, for instance, discussing not only how websites affect customers but how content and design might create actual expectations. In other words, due to the possibilities in the sphere of online consumer behaviour and website studies in tourism, analysing various elements in relation to the creation of expectations is achievable.

As determined, many characteristics combined lead towards a successful website which is said to create consumer satisfaction (Law & Hsu, 2006; Park & Gretzel, 2007; Ip, Law & Lee, 2011). This paper suggests that since rating these characteristics and

attributes is more explored than their outcomes (Park & Gretzel, 2007), researching website visitor's expectations takes the topic in relation to online consumer behaviour to a new level. That being said, despite various studies in relation to the website characteristics and consumer satisfaction, there are also various theoretical and practical limitations to be considered while conducting this research (Cheung, Chan & Limayem, 2005; Law & Hsu, 2006; Park & Gretzel, 2007; Ip, Law & Lee, 2011).

It was briefly mentioned, that one of the limitations for website studies is the lack of actual methods that can be applied to collecting and analysing the data (Ip, Law & Lee, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013). In relation to the data collecting, Couture et. al. (2013) bring up another matter that complicates the process: the matter of monitoring the website visitor. More importantly, whilst it is possible to view the process of browsing the website on the computer screen, the individual action by the visitor is left unexplored (Couture et. al., 2013). In other words, there are various limitations to be considered due to the visitor's actions on the website being driven by individual thoughts.

The selection of research subjects also embodies few limitations, including the relevance of the individuals as well as the matter of prior experience (Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014). Meaning that the collectable data should come from a previously selected group of individuals that have certain experience in relation to the field of research. For instance, the constantly growing number of Internet users in Estonia (Soiela, 2013) indicates that majority of Estonians have already participated in the role of an online consumer and as it will be discussed later, the theory of expectations indicates an even more specific set of previous experiences.

1.2 Tourism semiotics

Based on the primary objective, to analyse the effects of visual elements (signs, text, images etc.) found on a website, another fundamental part of the literature review is about tourism semiotics which is well discussed by Culler (1990) as well as Tresidder (2011). As Culler (1990) approaches the topic with the emphasis on culture, the main

purpose of Tresidder's article is to look and discuss the method of presenting signs and imagery in the tourism industry that creates certain meanings and expectations for tourists. Both articles present interesting ideas and create a valid connection between concepts such as tourism, culture and semiotics. It is interesting to mention that both authors (Culler, 1990; Tresidder, 2011) discuss the influence of society and culture as one of the key elements in the process of creating meanings through signs and images for tourists.

This understanding of signs conveying meaning has been previously researched through the sign value concept and its relation to online travel related information search by Cho and Kerstetter (2004). Though they hypothesised that individual characteristics, such as previous experience, gender and education, might influence the sign value during the browsing process, their findings were negative (Cho & Kerstetter, 2004). Despite the inconclusive results and the fact that the research placed its primary focus on the *sign*, Cho and Kerstetter (2004) introduced a valid connection between the semiotic approach, the symbolic meaning and the online consumer who's related to tourism.

Although this research does not set its focal point on the sign and its value but rather on its outcome, it is still crucial to apprehend the concept of tourism semiotics. Most importantly, tourism semiotics helps to create an understanding that the interpretation of images and signs is an individual process that is based on the subject's background as well as previous experiences (Tresidder, 2011). Wider understanding of this means that a tourist could be viewed as a semiotician (Tresidder, 2011; Culler, 1990) and furthermore, these images and signs can also be seen as words, colours and/or a combination of all three (Tresidder, 2011). That means that in case of a website, the viewing is not limited to the interpretation of the images but it is also aimed at signs around it, such as slogans, catchphrases and also elements of visual design.

Though the interpretation of the images is said to be an individual process and has therefore a subjective outcome, the images and signs are actually represented through a sphere that is already socially and culturally determined (Tresidder, 2011). In other words, though the process of creating meaning and expectations based on the image is individual, the subject receiving the image cannot interpret without definitions that are pre-constructed socially and culturally (Tresidder, 2011). This fact helps to minimize

the effect of a limitation mentioned in relation to website research, which stated that it was impossible to monitor the subjects themselves (Couture et. al., 2013), indicating that the actions of an online consumer might be driven by pre-determined social and cultural factors. This research paper makes the following assumption that subjects with previous experiences and similar social and cultural backgrounds view Strand Spa website analogous.

As the sign, text or an image is constructed and received by a tourist in order to create its meaning to that specific tourist, one of the ways to analyse such a process is through *representation* (Hall, 1997) – which is a process of interpretation. Since representation is also the focus of Jenkins (2003), who studies images found on tourism brochures, the importance of Hall (1997), despite the fact that his theory does not necessarily focus on tourism, is evident. Representation can be described as a presentation of meaningful ideas to people through language (Hall, 1997), making this one of the main concepts of this paper because the idea of representation is supported by various authors (Tresidder, 2011; Jenkins, 2003; Santos & Marques, 2011; Larsen, 2006) in relation to the topic of tourism semiotics.

One of the limitations of this theory is the fact that they do not distinguish between different types of tourists. This shows a significant shortcoming in the current theory of tourism semiotics that is based on a wider understanding of tourism. Therefore, this paper creates a possibility to contribute to the tourism semiotics by narrowing down the concept by viewing spas as tourism destinations. Rather than focus on tourists in general, this research is going to adapt the theory of tourism semiotics to spa visitors, who travel from point A to point B and stay overnight. A possibility of this more specific approach is presented by Tresidder (2011) who states that through the semiotic language of tourism a semiotic construction of a certain time and space is created to represent an *extraordinary* experience. Meaning, spa visitor, without any language barriers, can participate in an extraordinary event which can be categorized as a semiotic experience.

With the process of narrowing down the focus of tourism semiotics to the spa industry the theory will be aimed specifically towards spa visitors. This also raises a possibility of avoiding the problematic areas of tourism semiotics such as viewing all tourism sites

as semiotic signs (Lau, 2011; Knudsen & Rickly-Boyd, 2012). In other words, rather than focusing on a tourism site as a sign itself, this paper will analyse specific signs and images related to a tourism site (a spa) that will co-create meanings and expectations to that site from the inside. More specifically, this research will focus on a spa website because those signs and images that create expectations for visitors can be consumed not only during the spa visit but also before (Santos and Marques, 2011). The reason this distinction is necessary is to separate expectations from the co-creation process that leads to satisfaction (Williams & Soutar, 2009), which will be further discussed in chapter 1.3.

Consumption of the signs and images through a website brings in another theoretical aspect that will help to understand the interpretation process of those elements: the theory of content analysis of visual images. Based on *The Handbook of Visual Signs* (2004), there are numerous ways to approach this process in terms of analysis and research (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2004). But since the topic of this paper is specifically aimed towards the spa industry and the spa visitor, Bell (2004) and Lister & Wells (2004) are represented as the basic foundation of the theory about the content analysis method applied to visual signs.

In his article, Bell (2004) explains the advantages as well as limitations of content analysis by using the Cleo magazine covers as the basis of his explanations. Having made a clear connection between images used in advertising with content analysis, Bell (2004) provides an indirect link between this specific method of analysis with, for instance, an image found on the Strand Spa website. But in order to form an even better understanding of the spa visitor's state of mind while the interpretation of these images takes place, based on Lister and Wells (2004), the spa visit should be viewed as a cultural practise. This helps to formulate the following: the image on a spa website is a culturally and socially constructed and consumed *product* (Lister & Wells, 2004) and this idea in turn is linked to the previously discussed theoretical approaches about representation (Hall, 1997) and tourism semiotics (Tresidder, 2011). Keeping in mind that it is important to find new ways to research textual and visual destination representation for visitors (Michaelidou et. al., 2013), the topic at hand is also current

and aims to find new knowledge of visitors expectations based on online consumer behaviour and tourism semiotics.

Though tourism semiotics is well connected to other theoretical approaches and many authors have presented valuable ideas to form an understanding of creating meaning, as well as the importance of imagery in tourism (Larsen, 2006), their focus is mostly aimed towards processes such as travelling abroad and visiting tourism sites. From the theoretical standpoint, there are two key problems that can be derived from this: one of which is the matter of understanding the difference between a foreign and a domestic visitor, and the other is distinguishing between printed and online imagery.

Theoretically, as representation is a process of interpreting received text and imagery through language (Hall, 1997) and subjects with shared social and cultural backgrounds are expected to process signs alike (Tresidder, 2011), while these social groups share a similar language (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006), the separation between the concepts of foreign and domestic visitors is elementary. Furthermore, as the subjects belong to a certain social and cultural group, it is important to make the assumption that the object at hand, in this case a spa, should share that collective background. Not only is this factor relevant to representation (Hall, 1997), cultural background is also said to influence the emotional perception of online consumers who's attitudes towards websites vary from culture to culture (Mazaheri et. al., 2014). More importantly, as culture has an effect on expectations regarding website quality, the background of subjects in the same cultural sphere could also influence the outcome of developing expectations (Tsikriktsis, 2002). To take this discussion even further, by previously connecting tourism semiotics to representation and therefore finding the link between representation and content analysis of visual images, the nature of this combined theoretical approach becomes highly dependable on culture. In other words, despite the complex nature of this thesis, all the main topics and concepts adapted in this paper are indeed theoretically associated with one another by being influenced by the subject's cultural background.

In regards to printed and online imagery, derived from the advertising theory, a problematic topic strongly related to this research becomes highly relevant and questions the information received from a website. In a comparative article, Jones,

Pentecost and Requena (2005) came to three important conclusions in connection with advertising images that are either printed or viewed online. Firstly, the printed images have said to carry more beneficial properties such as motivation and secondly, it is most likely for a subject to recall images that are printed rather than those viewed from a screen (Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005). Lastly, as online environment allows subjects to browse more openly, going from one source to another and going back to the original page, it is assumed that the subject might not concentrate as deeply as with printed materials (Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005). In other words, online consumers might not give their full focus on images viewed on screen and the information received from a website is less likely to be recalled afterwards. Since it is theoretically relevant, these specific differences between online and printed images raise multiple problems for the research process, especially in concern to methodology which will be more thoroughly discussed in the next chapter. Finally, as the topic of experience has been significant throughout this literature review, Jones, Pentecost and Requena (2005) also add another dimension to this by emphasizing the importance of comfort with computer screen and Internet usage as one of the aspects that might benefit the process of remembering online information.

1.3 Importance of expectations

The importance of understanding the tourist's process of decision making is hereby evident (Heitmann, 2011) and there is a strong need to apprehend the cognitive process of the visual images creating expectations for the spa visitors. With signs conveying meaning (Culler, 1990; Cho & Kerstetter, 2004; Tresidder, 2011), visual representation prompting certain behaviour (Gao & Bai, 2014), cultural background affecting the attitude of a subject (Mazaheri et. al., 2014), and comfort with Internet altering the process of remembering received information (Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005), it is clear that the previous theoretical approach is highlighting the importance of understanding how expectations are created.

Driven by the idea that the tourist is motivated by the need to find satisfaction (Heitmann, 2011), and though many theoretical approaches focus on expectations when

discussing satisfaction (Oliver, 1980; Oh, 1999; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Kozak, 2001; Chen & Chen, 2010; Eusébio & Vieira, 2013), this paper will emphasize the importance of expectations prior to the visit to a specific destination. In other words, rather than focusing on the co-creation of satisfaction based on a tourist's expectations followed by the actual experience on site (Williams & Soutar, 2009), the aim is to understand how images and visual signs can shape expectations before the actual visit. This will also create a more in focus theoretical framework because, though expectation prior to the experience is the key element of customer satisfaction (Trudel, Murray & Cotte, 2012), there is also a need to differentiate expectations in the process of measuring that satisfaction (Oh, 1999). Therefore, from the theoretical point of view, satisfaction will be considered simply as an outcome of expectations, and the theoretical focus is on expectations which will provide a better understanding of the spa visitor before the actual experience on site.

Despite of this, it is still important to mention that there are several points in which expectations become the core of criticism towards measuring the customer satisfaction. One of which is the disagreement in defining expectations in general and the other is the fact that expectations have a subjective nature (Kozak, 2001). Taking this into account, this paper will view the outcome of expectations as a *prediction* of the upcoming visit (Oliver, 1980) whilst processing the gathered information of study subjects individually as well as together and understanding their personal preferences. Based on Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick (2005), expectations cannot be formed without any previous experience as a spa visitor which therefore theoretically also limits the choices of subjects for this research. This fact is in correlation with the notion that the subjects, who are online consumers browsing the website, have obtained previous experience with this particular process in general (Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014).

When it comes to expectations it is important to mention that it could be divided into four categories of different types: 1) forecast – what the customer thinks will happen, 2) normative – what the customer thinks should happen, 3) ideal and 4) minimum tolerable (Oliver, 1996 as cited in Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005). A more minimal approach shows only two stages of expectations (Parasuraman et. al., 1991a, b as cited

in Hsieh & Yuan, 2010), where the first is expectations based on desire or what the customer is hoping to get and the second is lower, meaning the adequate level of expectations (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010). Though helpful towards understanding expectations, despite clarifying the fundamentals of expectations, both of these distinctions do not provide an actual framework for the current paper.

Keeping that in mind, another way to describe expectations is to state that it is a preference (Manski, 2004) or a frame of reference that the visitor creates (Oliver, 1980), in which the visitor is influenced by factors such as the symbolic elements and previous experience with the product, social context and individual characteristics (Helson, 1959 as cited in Oliver, 1980). The most important aspect of this is to view the process of measuring those expectations (Manski, 2004) in order to determine a framework for the research conducted in this paper. Measuring expectations as a process can have theoretical limitations, one of which is not taking into account verbally given subjective answers as part of the data due to the difficulties of interpreting it (Manski, 2004). Therefore there is a need of an even more specific theoretical approach inside the economic sphere, more specifically, the matter of which customer expectations is being viewed either as a part of the consumer satisfaction or as an element of service quality (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005). Due to the fact that the latter is a more broader look on satisfaction, while being more or less interested in the service ideal (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), the current paper will focus more on the former. In addition, as it was previously determined, this paper will view satisfaction as the outcome of expectations (Oh, 1999; Trudel, Murray & Cotte, 2012), which also indicates the matter of consumer satisfaction to be more relevant for this topic.

Since professional service and its high quality comes down to achieving expectations during the process of providing service, the importance of understanding expectations is an essential part of service management (Ojasalo, 2001) and service design (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010). That being said, the nature of expectations is rather complex and can differ between customers who's physical and mental needs vary, for instance due to context and the service itself (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010). More importantly, the customer expectations towards professional service could be viewed as something long term (Ojasalo, 2001) and indicating that understanding, measuring and managing those

expectations creates actual customer relationships. It also raises a question whether first time website visits can create such expectations as reviewed here, especially considering the impact of website images and elements on online consumers in comparison to printed images (Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005).

Though the fundamental idea of website elements creating expectations does not correlate with Hsieh and Yuan's (2010) theory, as they view expectations as internal factors not external, the fact that their study of developing a service design model that combines external and internal elements together (Hsieh & Yuan, 2004) still indicates the possibility of website elements creating certain expectations. In other words, the particular spa website, Strand Spa, does develop anticipation for the customer and sets up an understanding of what the service providers should offer (Hsieh & Yuan, 2004), both of which fall indirectly into the categories of expectations (Oliver, 1996 as cited in Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005). It is hereby important to mention that these expectations discussed in this paper are not Strand Spa specific and that the website used in the experimental research only serves as an example for the subjects. Furthermore, taking into account the framework of expectations management, the website elements in this research are universal findings which create and then alter various types of expectations in order to collectively form that long-term customer relationship (Ojasalo, 2001).

1.4 Proposed framework of expectations

At this point, the theoretical background related to expectations indicates a very complex system of approaches that are in fact in relation to each other (Oh, 1999; Hsieh & Yuan, 2004; Manski, 2004; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005) but the literature review has yet to propose a solid framework to research the online consumer's expectations prior to the experience itself. The basis of the current paper will be Ojasalo's (2001) framework and it will be strongly supported by an Internet related expectations study by Hamer and Alwitt (2003). More precisely, Ojasalo (2001) provides a fundamental basis for understanding expectations and Hamer and Alwitt (2003) give further insight into the matter of studying the effects of websites.

The key understanding of Ojasalo's (2001) framework is that a combination of different types of expectations is in turn *managed* into another type of expectations by the service provider. That indicates that various sets of expectations can be formed by a subject before the actual encounter with, for instance, a spa. Therefore, as an online consumer browses a website, he or she is creating expectations: accordingly subdivided into customer's needs, wishes and feelings towards the service (Ojasalo, 2001). From the view point of an online consumer, the interaction with the service provider through a website could in fact set higher expectations to the actual service encounter (Hamer & Alwitt, 2003) and it might also influence substantially the quality of the experience itself (Kim & Choi, 2013). In other words, a website, for instance Strand Spa homepage, is an important service *interaction* with the customer.

It is clear that expectations can be categorized by their level of *strength* or *the amount of anticipation* (Oliver, 1996 as cited in Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Parasuraman et. al., 1991a, b as cited in Hsieh & Yuan, 2010) but expectations can also be defined by the amount of level of understanding the customer has towards the specific service provider (Ojasalo, 2001). Based on the latter, there are three so called basic expectations, fuzzy or unclear, implicit and unrealistic, which are then *managed* accordingly into precise, explicit and realistic expectations and they can all vary in degree as well as occur simultaneously (Ojasalo, 2001).

Fuzzy or unclear expectations can be seen as customer's need to see a change in the service itself but they are not able to communicate them precisely. Therefore, the customer expects something different and yet, they are unclear what *it* actually is that they wish to be changed in order to not feel unsatisfied. Though it seems that the nature of fuzzy expectations is extremely subjective and unclear, the importance of it is still evident and an influential part of the service experience. (Ojasalo, 2001) In other words, expectations that the customer cannot verbally communicate or express clearly, can be categorized as fuzzy expectations and, as it seems that they do not manifest before the actual service experience, they cannot be explored inside the scope of this research. More importantly, as an online consumer makes decisions towards what they want to access (Hamer & Alwitt, 2003), it is unlikely that fuzzy expectations can even form since website browsing is a decision based process.

Precise expectations are seen as the opposites of unclear expectations (Ojasalo, 2001) and it can be said, that these expectations are clear to the customer. By adding focus to fuzzy expectations, or accessing certain website parts based on subjective decisions (Hamer & Alwitt, 2003), the problems and needs of the customer become more clear and verbally understandable (Ojasalo, 2001). Going even further into the definition of unclear expectations, one can also formulate the following idea based on Ojasalo's (2001) distinction and the topic of this paper: viewing a website image on its own can create fuzzy expectations due to the lack of context but adding verbal explanations and adding focus can manage these into precise expectations. In addition, the amount of previous experiences with similar service providers which are needed in order to form expectations in the first place (Higgs, Polonsky and Hollick, 2005), can contribute to the process of expressing these unclear expectations. Therefore, the more experienced the customer is with the spa services in general, the clearer are their expectations.

Implicit expectations are service characteristics that the customer does not actively acknowledge, in other words, elements that are self-evident and these may not be even consciously stated. The difficulty of these types of expectations is that they only become evident after they are not met by the service provider: therefore the customer has to experience the service in order to identify these implicit expectations (Ojasalo, 2001). From the theoretical standpoint it means that in order to determine the implicit expectations created by a website, the customer also has to go through the process of experiencing that service only to pinpoint the expectations that were not present. In other words, the definition of implicit expectations indicates that if they are met, the customer may not even verbalise their existence which in turn is a limitation of this study. Not to mention the fact that viewing the experience as a co-creation process which leads to an outcome of service satisfaction (Williams & Soutar, 2009), the research minimizes the possibility of identifying the subject's implicit expectations due to not focusing on customer experience.

Another reason implicit expectations are excluded at this point is provided in Ojasalo's (2001) framework. Previous experience with the same and/or similar service provider can also initiate the creation of implicit expectations (Ojasalo, 2001). In other words, it is necessary to distinguish between implicit expectations that are created specifically by

the website towards that service and are not influenced by previous experiences with other similar services or the same service provider. Therefore, though previous experience, which is elementary for creating expectations (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), could influence subject's expectations and should be investigated further, it does not fit the parameters of this research, which means implicit expectations are not included in this framework.

Finally, when the customer is aware of their wishes and is consciously putting emphasis on certain service elements, the expectations can be viewed as explicit (Ojasalo, 2001). Indicating that the customer has formed a certain desire towards the upcoming service experience (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010) and is able to specify why these expectations were not met (Ojasalo, 2001). Taking into account the fact that Ojasalo's (2001) categorisation separately includes unrealistic expectations, it can be said that explicit wishes can be also achievable by the service provider. Furthermore, these explicit expectations can be seen as facts or images provided by the service provider on the website, indicating what the service is realistically going to offer for the customer. In other words, the customer could create explicit expectations based on the information found on the website.

As said, explicit expectations are not necessarily unrealistic because those could be defined as something impossible or extremely unlikely for the service provider to achieve. These expectations can be related to a person or an overall service solution that the company is not equipped to handle. (Ojasalo, 2001) It is not specified what may cause these unrealistic expectations nor does Ojasalo (2001) provide a better definition but taking into account the fact that one of the categories of expectations is the service ideal (Oliver, 1996 as cited in Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), it could be stated that these expectations require the perfect service. Realistic expectations indicate a higher possibility of being fulfilled by the service provider and therefore can result in a more satisfying experience (Ojasalo, 2001).

As previously mentioned, the nature of explicit expectations can be either realistic or unrealistic and since that concept applies to all customer expectations (Ojasalo, 2001), there is a clear need to identify unrealistic ones in order to dismiss them due to the fact that they are unachievable. One of the limitations of this point of view is that these

unrealistic expectations most likely vary between service providers and, due to the specificity of this paper, it is more difficult to determine their existence. Meaning, due to previous experiences (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010), the customer can form realistic expectations based on a previous service that may be unrealistic for the other service providers. Therefore, the expectations that are based on experience are yet again dismissed as being determined only by having a thorough overview of subject's previous experiences.

By categorizing expectations as previously shown, it is more likely to determine which website elements create expectations and/or if they are met by the service provider due to the fact that most expectations do not fit into this specific research sphere. What Ojasalo's (2001) theory does not provide is the understanding how these expectations are created by the customer and how one can determine what actually initiates the creation process. Based on Helson (1959 as cited in Oliver, 1980), there are three main aspects that create expectations for a customer: 1) symbolic elements, previous experience, 2) social context and 3) individual characteristics. Since the main objective is to determine the elements creating expectations found on a spa website, the visual images will be viewed as symbolic elements. To limit the difficulties of this theoretical framework (Ojasalo, 2001), the experience with the Strand Spa, which website is used, is eliminated – meaning, the subjects used in the experiment will be visiting this specific spa website for the first time and will not have prior experience with Strand Spa itself. Though not included in the research, previous experience with other Estonian spas is still viewed as a requirement for subjects (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005).

Taking into consideration that a website might initiate the creation of a destination's pre-image (Frias et. al., 2012; Jeong et. al., 2012) and having made a conclusion that a website is a collection of symbolic visual elements, it is elementary to research what subjects think about the website while assuming that certain reactions to its factors, positive or negative, create expectations. Therefore, since the meaning of images is important in tourism (Larsen, 2006), and a website is compiled with multiple visual images and signs transferring meaning (Culler, 1990; Tresidder, 2011), Strand Spa website creates certain expectations. In other words, based on the theoretical framework of expectations (Helson, 1959 as cited in Oliver, 1980; Ojasalo, 2001; Parasuraman et.

al. 1991a, b as cited in Hsieh & Yuan, 2010; Hsieh & Yuan, 2010) and derived from online consumer behaviour (Cheung, Chan & Limayem, 2005; Park & Gretzel, 2007; Couture et. al., 2013; Gao & Bai, 2014; Gergori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014), expectations are created for subjects with diverse experience (Ojasalo, 2001; Cho & Kerstetter, 2004; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005; Tresidder, 2011; Trudel, Murray & Cotte, 2012; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014), by website elements before the spa visit.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Experimental research and selection of subjects

The result of developing a coherent theory to present the basic understanding of expectations (Oh, 1999; Ojaalu, 2001; Hsieh & Yuan, 2004; Manski, 2004; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005) and to understand the need for this research through tourism semiotics (Tresidder, 2011), representation (Hall, 1997; Jenkins, 2003) and online consumer behaviour (Mattila, 2004; Law & Hsu, 2006; Park & Gretzel, 2007; Ip, Law & Lee, 2011; Frias et. al., 2012; Ho, Lin & Chen, 2012; Jeong et. al., 2012; Gao & Bai, 2014), the process of selecting a suitable methodology becomes crucial as well as difficult. That being said, based on the theory, there are various limitations adaptable to methodology that will simplify the overall research process, data collection as well as subject selection.

Due to the basic interest towards understanding the creation of expectations for spa visitors, the qualitative nature of this research indicates the use of three main methods: observation, interviews and documentary analysis (Woods, 2006). Though all three have individual advantages and disadvantages, there are also various theoretical understandings of expectations that might complicate the process of using these methods. For instance, the fact that expectations are indeed created before an upcoming visit (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010; Santos & Marques, 2011; Tresidder, 2011) indicates that the process of observation should happen prior to the spa experience which limits the observational situation only to the act of the viewer browsing Strand Spa's website. The theory regarding website studies also mentions this as one of the problematic areas regarding data collecting (Couture et. al., 2013). Therefore, since the interpretation of

the website is an individual mental act (Tresidder, 2011) and there is no physical activity visible to the observer (Woods, 2006), the qualitative method of observation is unsuitable for the purpose of this research.

Another theoretical finding also eliminates the usage of the interview method due to the fact that the data collected through a verbal communication is highly subjective and its interpretation is a problematic process (Manski, 2004). In addition, since the subjects of this paper are considered as online consumers, and their process of viewing a website an individual act (Tresidder, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013), the theory eliminates the method of focus group interviews as well. Another limitation that indicates that the method of group interview is unsuitable for this research is the fact that expectations are subjective in nature (Kozak, 2001). In other words, the discussion in the focus group will not benefit the outcome of the research because the process of developing ones expectations is an independent act.

One of the biggest aspects of this research that provides the most limitations, and also creates the most difficulty for choosing the methodology, is the, already mentioned, subjective nature of expectations (Kozak, 2001). Despite of this, a framework of expectations was compiled based on various authors (Ojasalu, 2001; Manski, 2004; Hsieh & Yuan, 2010; Santos & Marques, 2011; Tresidder, 2011), which allows to narrow down the choice of methods. Since the theory of this paper indicates a presence of controllable factors such as the choice of subjects (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014), the research object itself (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010; Santos & Marques, 2011; Tresidder, 2011) and some of the data collecting conditions, the basis of methodology is compatible with the method of experimental research (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004; Vogt, 2005).

This experimental research is strongly based on an understanding that the subjects for this paper are dependent variables who are influenced by their independent variables. In other words, the subjects are purposely selected, making them dependent in nature, with their own personal characteristics, experiences and preferences, which also create expectations (based on Helson, 1959 as cited in Oliver, 1980), being the independent variables. Theoretically speaking, the best form of research method for the dependant variable is self-report or diary, where the subjects are free to express their emotional

attitudes regarding the phenomena. Due to the nature of this method being highly self-conscious, there are various problems that complicate the research process, for instance the reliability of the subject's answers is in question when collecting the data (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004). Another method, based on the definition of dependant variable, adaptable for this research is a more close-ended and structured format with multiple-choice responses. This type of questionnaire for the subjects is most effective in case of a hypothesis-testing research, and therefore, in this case, highly relevant. One of the negative aspects of close-ended formats is that its' results may be unsatisfactory and more open-ended self-report would be more sufficient. (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004) Keeping this in mind, this research paper is aimed towards avoiding this conflict of the methods regarding dependant variables, and plans to use both in order to collect more in-depth data from its research subjects.

Theoretically, one of the essential findings was the fact that subjects with alike culture and social backgrounds, also having previous experiences, (Tresidder, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013), might interpret website characteristics similarly. In other words, as tourism semiotics indicates, individuals with shared background have similar means to understand signs, images and text (Culler, 1990; Treisdder, 2011). Even further, Pan and Fesenmaier's (2006) study in relation to online consumer behaviour emphasizes the fact that different social groups have distinctive languages for apprehending online information and Tsikriktsis (2002) agrees with the importance of the culture as well. This helps to narrow down the selection of the research subjects into a specific group of individuals based on various factors. Shared cultural background between subjects and the Strand Spa means that the group of people selected for this research are Estonians viewing a website of an Estonian spa. This means that the subjects are domestic tourists who stay overnight and as the growth of domestic tourism has continued to grow in Estonia (EAS Enterprise Estonia, 2014) this selection of subjects is highly relevant. Based on the framework of expectations (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), all of the subjects have preciously visited other Estonian spas, therefore having prior experience.

Finally, since the selection of the subjects is highly driven by background and spa experience, the subjects are women at the age of 40–65, who are assumed to have more spa experience, and work in a similar field of profession. Since tourism semiotics

implies to a shared cultural and social background (Tresidder, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013), that will benefit the outcome of the analysis and therefore, the selected group cannot be randomly chosen since all the individuals have to share specific similarities. Therefore the number of subjects is rather limited and they are selected solely with this research topic in mind.

2.2 Diary driven questionnaires and their aim

Based on the theory and the methodological choices influenced by the theoretical limitations as discussed in the previous chapter, one of the methods for this research is an individually filled out questionnaire. As the nature of a questionnaire can be either closed-ended or open-ended, with both potentially being problematic on their own (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004), the research aims towards a more complex questionnaire in terms of its structure. As the nature of expectations is subjective (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), the need apprehend personal and individual data is in question whilst it indicates a need to have a more particular data collection in mind. Combining the method of questionnaires with the method of diary aims to do just that. Though the usage of Internet based questionnaires has increased (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008; Denissen, Neumann & Zalk, 2010), this research does not use this method due to having subjects with very specific set of characteristics in mind. Also, as the subjects are aimed towards filling out a diary whilst viewing the Strand Spa website, the usage of online based questionnaires becomes irrelevant.

Diaries are seen as a good way to obtain personal data (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004), which in this case, means guiding the subjects answers towards marking down individual thoughts. This indicates that the diary itself is less structured as its aim is to describe the on-going thoughts of the online consumer while viewing the website followed by the more specific questionnaire is a more structured data collection process. Since the basic nature of this research is experimental, there are few data collecting conditions that apply for filling in these questionnaires (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004; Vogt, 2005). In order to gather a more homogenized data, the research subjects

filling these diary-questionnaires have the same physical surrounding as it is said that the researcher can control some of the conditions as a part of the experiment (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004; Vogt, 2005). Due to the subjective nature of the collected data, it is essential that the conditions that apply to these subjects are as neutral as possible. Therefore the individuals are placed to form the task in the same closed room for 20–30 minutes. The duration of the experiment is derived from the fact that subjects' visual attention span related testing should last approximately 20–30 (Habekost & Starrfelt, 2009), meaning that the website viewing process requires attention that is limited by time.

Since it is theoretically impossible to control the actions of an individual browsing the website (Couture et. al., 2013), it is important that website related studies in general should have certain control over independent variables such as time, subjects, choice of pages (Cho & Kerstetter, 2004; Hamer & Alwitt, 2003). Having specified the timeframe, it is also important to mention that since this research is aimed towards Strand Spa related sites, the subjects are to only browse its specific content and focus especially on pages related to the spa and wellness. Due to the screen comfort factor (Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005), it is also important that the selected subjects are everyday computer users and have been exposed to Internet enough to feel comfortable.

What became evident during the theoretical construction of this topic is that inside the process of interpreting website elements factors such as pre-constructed definitions (Tresidder, 2011) and language (Hall, 1997) become highly relevant. So as the subjects are Estonians and the website belongs to an Estonian spa, the questionnaires are presented to the subjects in Estonian and the data received is afterwards translated into English which in turn complicates the research process. Pre-constructed definitions in Estonian might not reflect the same understandings in English as the representation process is dependent on language (Hall, 1997) and the constructed meanings are militated culturally and socially (Tresidder, 2011). Furthermore, though the researcher shares the same cultural background, it is believed that other similarities unshared with the subjects might complicate the research process and content analysis.

Since its importance theoretically is paramount (Ojasalo, 2001; Cho & Kerstetter, 2004; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005; Tresidder, 2011;

Trudel, Murray & Cotte, 2012; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014), the first aim of the questionnaires is to determine the factor of experience and the lack of certain experience among the subjects. Therefore, the questionnaire will provide introduction questions that will determine the level of experience the subjects have. In addition, shared background of the subjects will also be determined as social and cultural factors influence the meaning and the process of interpretation (Tsikriktsis, 2002; Tresidder, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013; Mazaheri, 2014).

Due to the subjective nature of this research (Kozak, 2001; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), the questionnaire will have more close-ended questions that aim towards collecting coherent data from the research subjects. That being said, in order to gain more sufficient data, the questionnaire will include open-ended questions and that, in addition to the diary method, (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004) will aim to apprehend individual understandings, thoughts and assumptions about Strand Spa's website elements. By applying previously discussed cultural, social and characteristic limitations to the selected subjects, the collected data from closed- as well as open-ended answers from individuals should be consentaneous in nature due to shared background (Tsikriktsis, 2002; Tresidder, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013; Mazaheri et. al., 2014).

2.3 Content analysis and data limitations

As it was previously theoretically concluded, subjects create expectations from the elements found on the spa website. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the visual signs and images, how representation of those elements takes place and to determine how the subjects interpret that information. For that kind of process, analysing visual imagery, content analysis is the most fitting (Bell, 2044; Lister & Wells, 2004). The definition of content analysis refers to it being applied to any cultural *text*, whether it is an image, an advertisement, a movie or even a website (Schwandt, 2007; Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010; Salkind, 2010). Though the classical method of content analysis refers to objectivity (Schwandt, 2007), by providing understandings of social phenomena, it aims

to explain how individuals read and interpret text which is a subjective process (Salkind, 2010). Since expectations are subjective (Kozak, 2001; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), and the topic of this research is driven by cultural context (Culler, 1990; Tresidder, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013), content analysis driven by subjective indications will be applied. This selection of method is also supported by tourism semiotics, which indicates that creating meanings to images and signs is an individual act (Tresidder, 2011) and therefore cannot be categorized as objective.

Content analysis means enquiring research questions that go outside the physical presence of the *text* (Salkind, 2010), meaning that the statistical information regarding subjects and website elements is secondary. Taking into account previous chapters, the secondary data, hereby experience, is viewed as a requirement for the subjects and to the analysis process. Since the main topic of this paper is expectations and its creation, it is interesting to mention that one possibility for content analysis and its research questions is being concerned with *something* that has not yet happened (Salkind, 2010). Meaning, as this paper proposes the creation of expectations based on Strand Spa's website elements, content analysis allows to analyze this process while the results themselves are not ready to be communicated by the subjects. In other words, by using content analysis it enables to evaluate received data before the results, which may or may not, present themselves in this research.

Through selected methods of collecting necessary data, Krippendorff (1980 as cited in Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010) has categorized six points content analysis itself needs to address. Firstly, the analysed data needs to be defined and that process itself should be explained, the factors regarding the subjects need to be determined but most importantly the context and boundaries of the analysis need to be set (Krippendorff, 1980 as cited in Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). This, in combination with the literature review and the collected data, will be further discussed in the next chapter. The process of analysing the data through content analysis also uses coding methods, such as frequency of words, (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010; Salkind, 2010) which means the current research can apply the frequency of specific answers to close-ended questions as part of the analysis. That being said, content analysis also allows apply new

coding methods during the analysis (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010), meaning, if the analysis creates additional information, other data coding can be thereby presented.

Due to various limitations set on the subjects, already previously discussed, the sample size of the group used in this experimental research is to be yet determined. As the topic at hand is complex and the collected data subjective, and there are specific requirements for subjects, the experiment is going to be conducted with 15 women. Based on the experimental method theory, though it does not specify the sample size, it indicates that using a smaller number of subjects could be seen as a simple experiment (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004). This means that, though this research set various limitations on the subjects due to theoretical outcomes, using a smaller number of individuals to conduct this experiment can still lead to results. The matter of a small sample size is also a limitation itself because it raises a question of how adaptable the analysis is in relation to generalization. Though it has been stated that this experimental research might not provide conclusive results, analytic generalization indicates that the findings from the analysis could elaborate to the theoretical background conducted for this paper (Schwandt, 2007). Meaning, this research aims towards a theoretical elaboration, suitable for a qualitative study of a single case with certain set of criteria, where generalization is viewed as a support of theory and not to be considered as statistical generalization (Schwandt, 2007).

By this point, various theoretical limitations in relation to expectations were discussed in Chapter 1, but considering the lack of methods for conducting website studies (Ip, Law & Lee, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013) the biggest data limitation is in regards to website statistics. In order to add another dimension to the study, and taking into account the matter of monitoring visitors while they browse the Strand Spa website (Couture et. al., 2013), statistical information of this site would provide additional data for the research. By having quantitative data regarding images and signs on the website combined with qualitative data gained from the subjects, the content analysis allows to use standard coding methods which might lead to more elaborate results (Salkind, 2010). Therefore the author of this paper contacted Strand Spa to request statistical website data to expand the data collection process. That potential information would have generated a more in-depth analysis but the spa in question declined

3. ANALYSIS

3.1 Subjects' background and previous experience

The first set of questions the subjects were expected to answer in the diary driven questionnaire (Appendix 1), was aimed to determine the subjects' background and previous experience. Those factors are crucial as they represent theoretical requirements for developing analogous expectations among the research subjects (Tsikriktsis, 2002; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Tresidder, 2011; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014; Mazaheri et. al., 2014). Therefore, the diary driven questionnaires were handed out to a pre-selected group of 15 Estonian women at the age of 40–65, who also work in the same establishment, and the cultural object selected for the research was an Estonian spa (Lister & Wells, 2004). This meant that having a shared cultural and social background not only between subjects themselves but between the subjects and the object was expected to lead towards a more coherent data collecting process. Though, the first selection process meant pre-determining these 15 women, done by the author outside the sphere of this research paper, the following questions were to assure the subjects' previous experience:

Q4: How often do you use the Internet?

Q5: How many Estonian spas have you visited?

With multiple choice answers, more than half of the respondents stated that they used the Internet daily and all others at least 2–3 times a week. Therefore, all the selected subjects were previously well acquainted with the Internet browsing process and comfortable with the computer screen - meaning, the online information processing was

more likely to be remembered afterward by the subjects due to their experience with computers (Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014). This means the information gained from the respondents after the process of browsing the website is more likely accurate as the subjects have previous experience as online consumers.

Since spa visitor's expectations form based on previous spa experiences (Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005), the second question aimed to determine the subjects' experience with visiting other Estonian spa facilities. Out of the 15 subjects, 33% had visited 1–3 spas, 20% 4–6 and almost half of the respondents (47%) 7–9 Estonian spas, which indicates that the research subjects have previous spa experiences and they can develop expectations.

Though subjects' previous experience is essential for creating ones' expectations, expectations theory indicates that implicit expectations, created through having the same service experience (Ojasalo, 2010), are not suitable for this research paper. Therefore, to exclude implicit expectations from this research paper, the following questions were aimed to determine unsuitable subjects:

Q6: Have you visited Strand Spa?

Q7: Have you visited Strand Spa website before?

A positive answer to either one of these questions meant that the subject was unsuitable for the research and in this particular situation one subject had visited the Strand Spa before and two had previously browsed its website, meaning, three out of 15 diary driven questionnaires are not taken into consideration in the following analysis. Taking into account their previous spa visitations, the percentage of the number of Estonian spas visited also changed, meaning, out of the 12 suitable candidates for this research paper, three subjects (25%) have been to 4–6 spas, four subjects (33%) to 1–3 and five subjects (42%) to 7–9 spas in Estonia. In other words, more than half of the respondents (67%) have been to at least four Estonian spas and have a lot of previous spa experiences in order to develop certain expectations. Another factor that might influence the analysis of the collected data is the number of spas the subjects have visited. Therefore, the further analysis in Chapter 3.3 aims to determine whether the amount of

experience with other spas might influence which elements create expectations the most.

Finally, the last introductory question of the diary driven questionnaire was aimed to determine how the subjects understood the main concept of this research paper. Driven by the literature review (Oliver, 1996 as cited in Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Ojasalo, 2001; Lister & Wells, 2004; Manski, 2004), the questionnaire asked whether the subject thought *expectations* were (Q8):

- A visual representation
- Informative understanding
- Emotional feeling
- A material need

Without considering the matter of differences between language and culture, which is especially relevant in relation to representation of signs and images (Hall, 1997), the understanding of *expectations* the subjects presented in their answers was rather interesting. Eight women (67%) considered *expectations* to be an informative understanding, with one subject also stating that the visual representation corresponded with information received from the website. The rest of the respondents understood *expectations* to be an emotional feeling, meaning, that none of the 12 subjects with previous spa experience, saw *expectations* as material needs. Though the research group was given a possibility to add their own thoughts, none described expectations with any other word that was not included in the list provided to the subjects. Therefore, one can make an assumption that material expectations are implicit, meaning, they manifest only after the service itself is experienced (Ojasalo, 2001) and therefore cannot be formed prior to the spa visit.

Another observation based on the introductory questions was the fact that subjects did not consider expectations to be something that is visually presented, with only one exception. The expectations framework indicates that visual expectations are actually fuzzy or unclear because the customer is unable to communicate them before the actual visit (Ojasalo, 2001). Meaning, it is difficult for the subjects to express visual

expectations before experiencing the Strand Spa facilities, and therefore the website elements that create expectations are more likely to be based on either information or in few cases, emotional feelings towards images and signs.

3.2 Diaries and primary research results

The next step for the subjects was to fill out a diary (Appendix 2), a process that took place only during the browsing of the Strand Spa website. In order to obtain valid diary entries, a short summarization of the task was provided to the subjects. With this method, the aim was to gather more coherent data and to minimize the theoretical limitation of monitoring the subject browsing the Strand Spa website (Couture et. al., 2013). The purpose was to obtain subjective information about the subjects while they were viewing elements on a website and a diary was considered to be the most suitable method (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004). Since there is a lack of statistical methods that can be applied to the subjects browsing a particular website (Ip, Law & Lee, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013), another aspect of the diary was to conduct an open-ended data collecting process for more sufficient results. In other words, the main intention of the diary was to gather information outside the physical text (Salkind, 2010) – from the subjects' mind. It is hereby important to emphasize the fact that all the research subjects participating in the experiment were placed in the same room during individual times for 20–30 minutes. Meaning, the subjects were alone during the entire research process: website browsing, filling out the diary and answering the questionnaire. Since it is theoretically proven that communicating verbal answers is problematic (Manski, 2004), the subjects had no means to communicate to other subjects or with the author of this research paper for further discussion.

Interestingly enough, not all the subjects were successful with the process of filling out the diary: seven women out of 12 wrote down their thoughts throughout the website browsing process, with five subjects noting down simply one or two insufficient remarks. This raises a rather important question in regards to monitoring the subjects because it is unclear why these five subjects failed to fill out a well-documented diary. That being said, in relation to the theory of online and printed images, Jones, Pentecost

& Requena (2005) point out that by viewing images online the subjects might concentrate less on the image on the screen than the one that has been printed. Meaning, the concentration of the subjects during the browsing process was most likely different and it altered the data collecting process through the diary method. Nevertheless, the subjective information gathered from the more conclusive seven diaries are hereby analysed by systematising the main thoughts and coding the more frequent comments on specific elements.

Upon primary reading of the diaries, it was clear that the nature of this research is subjective, which corresponds with the theory (Kozak, 2001), and means that the analysis of the notes is limited to subjective outcomes. That, and the fact that not all diaries were suitable for analysis, minimizes the amount of objective information gathered from the subjects but despite of this, there are some outcomes based on similar and/or same comments that emphasize the importance of particular website elements. Since the following information was gathered before the subjects read the questionnaire, it is most likely that this analysis provides an essential basis for understanding which elements create expectations and is later supported by the analysis of more close-ended answers in Chapter 3.3.

The most important website element that was pointed out by all seven subjects in their diaries was information with mentions like *information was receivable, [the webpage] gives information about bookings, comforts and rules* and *there seems to be enough information*. Though two diaries indicated the lack of information gathered about the Strand Spa, five expressed positive opinions in regards to the website's textual elements. Taking into consideration the question regarding the subjects' understanding of expectations, discussed in the previous subchapter, the majority of these seven subjects also understood expectations as information, with the expectation of two. Nevertheless, both of whom, despite perceiving expectations as emotional feelings, noted the website to have a fair amount of information. This indicates that the subjects view textual information as the basis for creating explicit expectations, meaning: the facts written on the spa website are more likely to create realistic expectations of the upcoming service (Ojasalo, 2001) than visual images and signs. The perception of

information from a positive sphere also indicates that the Strand Spa website presented itself successfully to the subjects (Park & Gretzel, 2007).

This founding is in turn challenged by the fact that four subjects expressed an opinion about Strand Spa's websites' dominating blue colour¹, whilst three vaguely also pointed out the *pleasant* outlook of the overall website. Meaning, though information was the number one common element between all diary entries, the visual appeal was expressed by altogether six subjects. Statements like *the dominant blue colour felt like the sea*, *webpage was minimalistic*, and *the blue colour crated a neutral outlook* were used by subjects to convey their thoughts. This indicates that both elements, informational as well as visual, are of importance for the subjects and it is difficult to determine which particular element is most likely to create expectations. Based on one particular diary, and supported by the theoretical outcomes in Chapter 1.2, these elements could not be viewed as separate but as elements which co-create expectations. In other words, as the subject not only emphasized the importance of information, but also pointed out the calming colour of blue and noted that the Strand Spa website had a pleasant design, the expectations are considered to appear based on the co-creation process by all previously mentioned website elements. From the viewpoint of tourism semiotics, this means that the image and the information are not only elements on their own but can also be seen combined together as a sign (Tresidder, 2011).

As it was stated in the expectations theory, visual elements could be viewed as fuzzy or unclear without verbal elements to support their meaning (Ojasalo, 2001), and though expressed only through one diary, the notion is still rather paramount. One particular subject expressed her dissatisfaction with the Strand Spa Wellness page image but concluded that the text element underneath the image elevated it: *the image [on the wellness page] seems boring at first but the text raises interest*. This again supports the fact that website elements co-create meanings and expectations, and the lack of affect a visual image can have on the subject can be altered by the text it corresponds to. One of the possibilities of the negative affect caused by the visual elements on Strand Spa's

¹ Findings from the questionnaire (Appendix 3) state that 82% of all the research subjects found the blue colour to be either neutral or pleasant (Q17).

website could be related to the lack of appeal these images convey. Four subjects out of seven mentioned their dissatisfaction with the images found on the spa website, with one using the word *cachexy* – meaning, one subject thought the images were poor mentally and/or creatively. Only one respondent of seven noted down that the images represented the spa in a positive manner, with two subjects having no mentions of these visual elements at all.

As the subjects were encouraged to browse the Strand Spa Spa and Wellness homepages all together for 15–20 minutes and since the subjects were placed individually in a closed room, there is no way to say how each subject spent their browsing time. This would hereby serve as a limitation for the simple experimental research but indicates that more in depth data collecting is feasible in this field of research. That being said, theoretically, though it could be made possible to monitor the subjects' browsing actions, the individuals' thought process would still be unclear (Couture et. al., 2013).

Another common factor that was more frequently mentioned in the diary entries was the matter of navigation within the Strand Spa website. Three subjects, who also expressed negative emotions towards the quality of the information and lack of images, found that there were some elements that influenced the website navigation and made the overall browsing process uncomfortable. Two of these respondents pointed out that the Strand Spa gallery was uneasy to use, stating that: *the spa gallery has pictures of the entire hotel, why?* This is a factor that might have influenced their perception of the image elements. The navigational problems these subjects experienced may lead to the development of distrust towards the service (Park & Gretzel, 2007; Gergori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014) and based on that finding, it is possible to assume that the subjects develop negative expectations based on these website elements.

Since the main priority of using the diary method was to obtain data that was personal (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004), it is self evident that some of information gained from the diaries was subject specific. In other words, though Strand Spa website elements and the research subjects shared a cultural and social background (Culler,

1990; Tresidder, 2011; Couture et. al., 2013), and the website was presented through common language (Hall, 1997), the subjects presented individual representation in addition to shared opinions. Some of these singular comments included the usage of the English language among the Estonian website, the understanding of the spa being modern and one of the subjects expressed a desire to visit the Strand Spa. Without a larger sample size, and due to the insufficient diaries from the five subjects, the analysis of these findings is, at this point, inconclusive. But, keeping in mind that open- and closed-ended data collection is more sufficient (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2001), these comments combined with the analysis of the questionnaire answers might lead to coherent results.

3.3 Analysis of the questionnaire answers

It is important to emphasize the fact that the subjects were expected to browse the website before filling out the questionnaire (Appendix 3), meaning that the previously conducted analysis was based on the assumption that the respondents were creating expectations. Theoretically, an online consumer does experience the process of creating a pre-image and/or a pre-assumption by viewing website's visual elements (Frias et. al., 2012; Jeong et. al., 2012; Gao & Bai, 2014), but in order to determine whether this was the case for the selected research subjects in this experiment, the following question was inquired:

Q9: Did the browsing of Strand Spa website create any expectations?

The majority of subjects, 75% stated that they did develop expectations after browsing the website, which proves that online consumer behaviour is most likely related to expectations and visual elements can contribute into its process. With the sample size being limited, it is difficult to analyze the three (25%) negative answers to this question. That being said, taking into consideration the following questions, Q10 and Q11, which asked to describe the kind of expectations that were created, one might make the following assumption: the subjects of this research see expectations as *positive* (75%).

In other words, by expressing the negative effects of the Strand Spa website, and having no expectations towards the service, indicates that the subjects, who have an unfavourable online experience, do not acknowledge negative expectations as expectations. This is strongly related to the theory of two stage expectations, first stage being based on desire and the second being tolerable (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010), meaning, an online consumer is capable of expressing only positive and neutral expectations regarding the service. The inability of communicating negative expectations could mean that the subjects see them as fuzzy, which means, these expectations manifest after the service encounter (Ojasalo, 2001).

Since subjects' experience is with theoretical importance (Ojasalo, 2001; Cho & Kerstetter, 2004; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Jones, Pentecost & Requena, 2005; Tresidder, 2011; Trudel, Murray & Cotte, 2012; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014), the questionnaire also aimed to gather supportive information (Q12 and Q13) regarding the subjects' experience with being an online consumer. With 75% of all respondents stating that they visit the spa website *almost always*, 11 out of 12 subjects agreed that visiting the spa website before the actual visit is *important* or *very important*. In other words, none of the subjects agreed with the statement of a websites being of *no importance* and all women had previously visited spa websites before their spa visits.

By establishing the importance of a spa website for the research subjects, and considering the topic of this research paper, the following question aimed to require specific knowledge about website's elements:

Q14: What is the most important element of a spa website?

Taking into account the theory of elements co-creating meaning (Ojasalo, 2001; Tresidder, 2011), and including the initial findings from the diary analysis, it is understandable that the research questionnaire gathered all together 19 answers (158%) from 12 subjects to this particular question. Meaning, for five subjects the importance of multiple elements was expressed. A more precise examination of the answers also shows a common factor among all 12 subjects, with one element, *list of procedures*,

being highly favourable among the research group and another element, *images*, being seen as insignificant (0%). This statement is immediately challenged by the fact that 67% of women agreed that both *images* and *descriptions of spa procedures* are important (Q15 and Q16). The contradictory information gathered from the questionnaire could be in relation to the visual image analysis based on the seven diary entries, where the findings indicated that the subjects were dissatisfied in regards to the Strand Spa visual images in general.

In order to clarify the latter findings, Q22 to Q26, in relation to the Strand Spa website images, are hereby analysed. As all the subjects browsed the spa gallery (Q22), with more than half getting a *good* impression from the images (Q23; Q24), none of the respondents liked the fact of having the descriptive titles of the images in English (Q25). In other words, as the language of the text elements were outside the cultural and social sphere of the research group, the subjects were most likely unable to interpret the combination of the image and text element through representation (Hall, 1997). Meaning, the situation in regards to the Strand Spa website images is complex and, due to the unperceived situation of contravening answers from the simple experimental research, hereby still inconclusive. This is supported by the fact that in regards to understanding the descriptive titles (Q26), five women had no opinion in the matter, two found the information to be inconclusive and five called them informative. Meaning, while the research group shared their dislike towards the English titles for images, 41% still found the image titles to be informative.



Image 1: Strand Spa website's Spa homepage header image

The conflict between visual and textual elements currently seems to be the most evident among the research results, as it was already briefly mentioned in the previous chapter

and has been highly relevant during the analysis of the questionnaire so far. To add to this discussion, some of the questions (Q17 – Q19, Q29, Q30, Q34), specifically aimed towards Strand Spa image elements (colour, images and an outtake from the spa's virtual tour), were motivated towards gaining more subjective data from the research group. For a better and a more sufficient data collecting process (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004), most of these questions (Q18, Q29, Q34) were to gain open-ended answers from the subjects. It is evident that by asking to describe specific images (seen here as Image 1 and Image 2, and see Image 3 in Appendix 3), two of them repeatedly used accordingly on Strand Spa website's Spa and Wellness homepages, it is difficult to code the answers to these questions. Nevertheless, some of the descriptions did have repeat mentions generating the opinions of these image elements into the following: Image 1 was *pleasant*, Image 2 was *poorly executed and ordinary* and Image 3 was *boring*. Taking all of that under consideration and emphasizing the fact that only 25% of the subjects participated in the Strand Spa's virtual tour (Q33), the following assumption can be made: this particular website's image elements are less likely to create expectations than textual elements. Analysing the results from Q19 and Q30, set to question the attitude towards repeated imagery, where more than half of the subjects did not notice or did not feel bothered by the lack of image diversity in both cases, one can make a clear statement: expectations are most likely not created by image elements but of text elements. The reason could be in relation to the previous finding, of subjects perceiving expectations as positive, and due to the overall dissatisfaction towards Strand Spa's image elements, the image elements most likely create implicit expectations.



Image 2: Strand Spa website's Wellness homepage header image

At this point, it is necessary to discuss the analysis of introductory questions which stated that 67% of the research subjects understood expectations as information, only

one respondent viewed expectations as visual representation and 0% saw it as a material need. These results were explained through the expectations literature (Ojasalo, 2001), where *needs* were categorized as implicit and capable of manifesting after the spa visit. It is hereby assumed that image elements also create implicit expectations, meaning, without the text element, subjects are unable to clearly communicate their expectations prior to their visit and can do so only after they experience the facility. In other words, through the representation process (Hall, 1997) subjects are able to successfully interpret and verbally communicate (Ojasalo, 2001) text rather than image elements. This would mean, from the theoretical stand-point, that text elements create precise expectations (Ojasalo, 2001) and since the selected subjects for this research had various levels of experience with other Estonian spas (Q5), they were able to have clearer expectations created by the text elements (Ojasalo, 2001). This corresponds with the analysis of previous results in regards to the research subjects selecting the *most important element* on a spa website to be *list of procedures* (Q14) which is also a text element that is based on information.

To support this statement, Q20 and Q31 made an inquiry in relation to the descriptive text elements² found accordingly on Strand Spa website's Spa and Wellness homepages. Frequently picked words, taking into account both text elements, were *cosy/comfortable*, *relaxation* and *treatments*. Out of 48 possible selections (all the subjects were to pick two words from two separate texts), *relaxation* was selected 11 times (23%), which is the highest compared to the other selected words gathered from the research group. Interestingly enough, this entire set of words, most appealing to the research group, was used in both descriptive texts, indicating that the overall representation of Strand Spa aimed towards these qualities through its text elements (for a full overview of subject selected words see Appendix 4). Yet, the subjects perceived these two text elements differently. 41% of women participating in the experimental research thought both texts created a *good* image of Strand Spa (Q21 and Q32) but 25% stated that the particular descriptive element on Strand Spa's Wellness homepage, created an unclear image of the facility.

² Though the questionnaires were in Estonian, the texts in question are hereby viewed as translations that are taken from Strand Spa's English website and can be seen in Appendix 3.

Theoretically, shared cultural background between the subjects, the object and the author is one of the key elements influencing the perception and understanding of visual elements (Hall, 1997; Tsikriktsis, 2002; Tresidder, 2011; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Mazaheri et. al., 2014), meaning, having elements outside the specific cultural and social sphere might cause confusion and have a negative effect. This situation was already briefly analysed regarding the descriptive titles on images being in English but to take this analysis even further, the usage of the word *wellness*³ was another website element that presented confusion. Hall (1997) sites that representation of signs, visual elements such as text and images, happens through language, and since the word *wellness* does not belong to the same cultural and social sphere as the subjects, 50% of respondents did not know what *wellness* stood for (Q27). Those who knew the meaning, or were simply able to translate the word, were asked to describe what kind of expectations “wellness” creates (Q28) and the results were interesting.

Three (25%) subjects stated that they expected well-being, one expected to spend a comfortable time, one perceived wellness as procedures and one subject expected wellness itself to be a centre to enjoy pleasures. It is evident that though the answers were different, the fundamental idea of wellness still created a common understanding among the 50% subjects who understood the word.

Before analysing the answers for two conclusive questions, it is important to note that the two of the latest findings have a common factor – the usage of the word *wellness* (Q27, Q31). Understandably, the word itself should carry a lot of meaning in the spa industry and especially for potential customers, but it is crucial to note that none of the research subjects underlined the words *wellness centre*. It can be generalized that the subjects do not perceive the meaning of *wellness* because they do not share the language (Hall, 1997) and therefore this specific visual element cannot successfully create expectations.

³ Strand Spa Estonian website has two pages for their spa, one of which titled “Spaa” and the other “Wellness” – meaning, the Estonian website does not have a translation of the word *wellness* and uses the English word.

Lastly, the subjects were asked to rate the Strand Spa website (Q35), with 67% stating it average, and in order to collect more comprehensive data, the subjects were required to answer the following question:

Q36: Based on website elements, the best pre-image was created by:

Going back to the beginning of this chapter, the questionnaire asked similar questions in regards to *expectations* and *website elements* (Q8, Q14). Since the creation process of expectations is a language driven process (Hall, 1997), the author of this paper set out to determine how the subjects perceived *expectations*, *elements* and *pre-image* by inquiring the same kind of answers using different wording, or more precisely, different text elements. While only one of the subjects expressed the importance of images in regards to *expectations* (Q8) and all the subjects prioritized the *element* of information (list of procedures) on a website (Q14), the final question showed that out of 13 answers (108%), seven subjects stated that the best *pre-image* was created by images and only four chose the *descriptive texts*. As the analysis so far has made a clear distinction between images and texts, it is clear that this type of separation between these visual elements is crucial and maybe even necessary. More precisely, when all the research subjects see expectations as information and the majority state that pre-image is best created by images, it can be said, that subjects do not perceive expectations as something visually apprehensible but rather something that can be verbally expressed via text.

It was also proposed in the beginning of this chapter that the subjects' amount of experience might influence the perception of elements. Due to the complexity of the data, and the fact that this simple experimental research had a limited sample size of subjects, the findings in regards to elements and experience might insinuate that there is no connection in between them. Meaning, those experiences are essential for expectations (Tsikriktsis, 2002; Higgs, Polonsky & Hollick, 2005; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Tresidder, 2011; Gregori, Daniele & Altinay, 2014; Mazaheri et. al., 2014), the amount of experience does not influence the outcome of the website elements creating expectations.

Since this research was conducted as a simple experience and it was set to determine which spa website elements created expectations, the conclusion of the analysis is to state the difference between text elements and visual elements. In other words, information creates explicit expectations that are clear to the subjects and are either realistic or unrealistic, while images are more implicit, meaning, they manifest after the spa visit (Ojasalo, 2001). Therefore, in regards to the creation of expectations before the spa visit, the website elements creating those expectations are information based text elements (descriptive texts, list of procedures, page names etc.) That being said, images together with text elements can also contribute to the subjects' expectations and can therefore be seen as clear expectations that can be verbally communicated. Nevertheless, taking into account the findings of Chapter 3.2, where the subjects were to fill out a diary during the website browsing, the subjects do notice and interpret visual elements, but the later findings based on the questionnaire indicate that the subjects are unable to clearly express those thoughts afterwards.

Due to the fact that Strand Spa website had descriptive text of images in English, and expectations require a shared cultural and social background (Hall, 1997; Tsikriktsis, 2002; Tresidder, 2011; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Mazaheri et. al., 2014), the analysis of these combined elements was inconclusive. With the usage of a different language, the subjects were unable to interpret these particular website elements successfully, meaning, the information gathered in regards to the text elements in English was limited. Therefore, as this experimental research had various limitations in regards to the data collection and in addition to the collected data itself, the findings of the analysis are viewed as propositions for further research. In addition, conducting a similar data collection survey with the same particular subject group after the spa visit, and analysing the results, could also achieve a more complete analysis.

3.4 Results and recommendations for further research

Based on the analysis of the introductory questions, the seven sufficient diary entries and the questionnaire, the research can make the following conclusions which serve as results. The most relevant to the topic at hand is the matter of understanding

expectations and it is evident that the subjects valued text elements over visual representation due to the fact that images create implicit and/or fuzzy expectations that are made clear only after the spa visit itself. That being said, by using various research methods to collect subjective data from the respondents, the results of the analysis indicate that image elements together with text elements are actually explicit for the subjects. Meaning, the most likely element on a spa website to create or co-create expectations is text because only through that element the online consumer browsing that particular website is able to acknowledge ones' expectations.

As the difference of text and image elements is more than evident, this research only provides an understanding that subjects are more capable of expressing their thoughts based on text elements. While image elements are of importance, the subjects are unable to communicate their expectations in regards to the images without the text element to co-create meaning. Further studies could research the specific effect of text elements, emphasizing on the matter that image elements create implicit expectations while text can make them explicit.

The matter of language was also vaguely explored in this simple experiment but further research can combine the current expectations literature review with linguistic findings and expand the theoretical background of this topic even further. Though it was evident through Hall's theory (1997) that the aspect of language is important, analysing the findings of Strand Spa website's text elements (*wellness*, image titles) was less explored. The matter of perceiving foreign words, or simply reading words that are misunderstood, would give a better insight into, not only *wellness* itself, but into the matter of online consumers browsing process. Adding similar limitations to subjects combined with finding better ways to monitor the subjects, this topic can generate a better understanding how subjects receive information from a website through text.

As the literature review pointed out the importance of language and culture through various authors (Hall, 1997; Tsikriktsis, 2002; Tresidder, 2011; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Mazaheri et. al., 2014), it is more than understandable that the analysis of the research results indicated that the subjects do perceive website elements through these factors. With multiple findings indicating that the usage of English words had a

negative effect on the subjects, it could be presumed that these specific elements failed to create expectations. The reason might be because expectations are perceived as positive and by having a negative effect on subjects, the representation of these specific elements is not possible.

Therefore, another interesting factor, which also influenced the process of collecting data, was the matter of the subjects perceiving expectations as positive. This was driven by the fact that the specific research subjects, who expressed negative opinions towards such elements like images, text and navigation, stated that Strand Spa website did not create expectations. In other words, it can be assumed that an online consumer, who has a dissatisfactory browsing experience, does not create expectations. Meaning, from the theoretical point of view, driven from the categorization of expectations (Hsieh & Yuan, 2010), and based on the results of the questionnaire (Q10), expectations are positive. More extensive research, using a bigger sample size of subjects and a larger scale of various website elements, could ensconce or disconfirm this result.

It is hereby important to also emphasize the fact that the subjects might perceive images better through text, as it was proven, by inquiring about the spa's *pre-image*, that subjects, who saw expectations as informative (67%), and thought of the *list of procedures* as the most important element (100%), valued images above others in regards to creating a pre-image (108%). More precisely, by requiring specifically about the spa's pre-image, the subjects valued the *image* element but when asked about the most important website element, the subjects were more than certain of it being a *text* element. This, combined with other main findings, indicates that there are various ways to expand this specific field of research in order to clarify the process of creating expectations through website elements even further.

Based on the latter, and motivated by tourism semiotics (Culler, 1990; Tresidder, 2011), further research in this field could also explore the effect text elements have on co-creating expectations with images. Since this experimental research only used a small number of images, and the titles of Strand Spa's images in the gallery were in English, the current analysis was inconclusive but informative. Text elements create explicit

expectations and subjects are more likely to communicate implicit expectations, created by images, through text. By expanding the scale of research, using text and image elements separately and together, the findings could give better insight into how text elements create expectations.

CONCLUSION

This research paper was written by keeping in mind an important, but frequently overlooked part of the spa service design – a website. More importantly, this paper was motivated towards understanding the creation process of expectations based on a website and its visual elements such as text and images. With the hypothesis being that a spa website does affect the customer in such a manner before the trip, the literature review and analysis were aimed, and later succeeded, towards proving that simple fact. Though the research itself indicates a presence of a spa website, and one was selected through a random process, Strand Spa, the results themselves are not in relation to this specific spa. Meaning, though the subjects were made aware of which spa's website they were browsing, the theory nor the analysis was driven by this specific spa and the results are generalizations of the findings, and not in any relation to the Strand Spa.

The first main emphasis was on the theoretical background, which sought out various concepts in order to develop a comprehensive and, more importantly, a combined understanding of online consumers, tourism semiotics and the creation of one's expectations. This resulted in a very thorough overview of these concepts which provided various limitations to not only methods but most importantly, to the process of selecting suitable subjects for this research. With the literature review providing a good framework for expectations, the limitations in turn indicated that a simple experimental study was the most effective way to gather and analyse the results. This meant adapting specific methods to subjects who were pre-selected for this research due to theoretical findings which were limited to a smaller sample size. This meant picking 15 women, at the age of 40–65, with a shared cultural and social background, and previous experience and conducting the up to 30 minute individual experiment in a closed room. There were

three stages of data collecting, one for establishing the suitability of the subject, the second to collect open-ended data and third to gather more specific answers from the respondents. Due to the limitations being subject specific, only 12 of the conducted experiments were considered valid for the analysis process.

The majority of the findings, through the simple experiment were theoretically driven and due to the nature of this research, highly subjective, but the analysis of the collected data did have beneficial results. For instance, an in depth research, in regards to the online consumer and expectation theories, lead to the primary understanding of expectations being extremely experience driven with the analysis of the research results indicating that the amount of previous experiences itself is not paramount. Meaning, while experience is fundamental for expectations, the scale of experience does not influence the process of creating one's expectations.

Since the main aim was to analyse the website elements creating expectations, the text and image elements were the core focus of the analysis. One of the main findings in regards to these elements was that subjects value website text over images and expectations created by text elements are more likely explicit, or in other words, clear for the online consumers. Though the findings based on the website elements were in some cases inconclusive due to the lack of data, it can be said that website images create expectations better through text and therefore the co-creation process becomes essential for the image elements.

Though this simple experimental research had various findings, in addition to previously mentioned the analysis also concluded, since the majority of subjects indicated as such, that expectations are positive and informative in nature, the main results were recommendation based. Meaning, that by adapting more focus towards specific findings of this experiment, the field of website element studies and expectations could further researched. Especially since the theoretical findings and the analysis results indicate an importance of visual website elements, images and text, creating expectations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Introductory questions

(Originally conducted in Estonian and hereby translated into English by the author.)

While filling in the diary driven questionnaire, the subject is urged not to divagate from the task at hand and focus solely on the Strand Spa website. Answering the questionnaire should take approximately 30 minutes, out of which 15–20 minutes should be spent on viewing the website.

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Occupation:
4. How often do you use the Internet?

Once a week / 2-3 times a week / daily

5. How many Estonian spas have you visited?

1–3 4–6 7–9 10+

6. Have you visited Strand Spa? Yes / No

7. Have you visited Strand Spa website before? Yes / No

8. Expectations are:

Visual representation / informative understanding / emotional, feeling / material need

Appendix 2: Diary

The purpose of the diary is to take quick notes of personal thoughts and opinions that form during the viewing process of Strand Spa's website and about its different elements. Notes should be short and taken down only during the process of viewing the website.

The website viewing process should take about 15–20 minutes. The subject should not try to remember the information found on the website, more important facts are later stated in the questionnaire – it is recommended to focus more on the visual viewing process.

It is also recommended to focus on the Spa and Wellness pages not on the Strand Spa general homepage.

After viewing the website and writing the diary, the subject will give answers the following questionnaire.

Appendix 3: Questionnaire

9. Did the browsing of Strand Spa website create any expectations?

Yes / No

10. What kind of expectations were they:

No opinion / negative / neutral / positive / very positive

11. In comparison to previous experiences, the expectations were:

No opinion / minimal / mediocre / better / too good

12. Do you visit spa websites prior to your spa visits?

No / seldom / sometimes / almost always / every time

13. How important is visiting the spa website while you plan your visit?

Not important / rarely important / sometimes important / important / very important

14. What is the most important element of a spa website?

Special offers / images / prices / list of procedures / spa etiquette / spa rules

15. How important is it to have images of the spa on the spa website?

Not important / rarely important / sometimes important / important / very important

16. How important is it to have descriptions of spa procedures on the spa website?

Not important / rarely important / sometimes important / important / very important

17. The dominant blue colour of Strand Spa website was:

Uncomfortable / nonchalant / neutral / pleasant / very appealing

18. Describe shortly this image on the spa page:



Image 1: Strand Spa website's Spa homepage header image

19. Using the same image on every spa page:

Did not notice / did not bother / no opinion / was unsettling / was distasteful

20. Mark two words in the following text that for you create an image of Strand Spa's spa the best:

"Our spa welcomes customers from the hotel and from outside. The spa is free for hotel guests. The cosy spa in warm colour tones provides enjoyable relaxation with steam sauna and Finnish sauna, heated lava rock seats, massage pool and Jacuzzi, and a swimming pool. In summer you can use an open terrace with comfortable recliners and refreshing drinks."

21. What kind of pre-image the previous text creates about Strand Spa's spa?

It does not / unclear / mediocre / good / very good / too good

22. Did you browse images of Strand Spa?

Yes / no

23. What kind of impression did these images leave?

An unclear one / dissatisfied / mediocre / good / very good / too good

24. What kind of impression did you retrieve from the images about Strand Spa facilities/procedures?

An unclear one / dissatisfied / mediocre / good / very good / too good

25. How do you feel about the descriptions of the images being in English?

No opinion / disliked it / nonchalant about it / liked it / liked it a lot

26. Were the titles of these descriptive images informative?

No opinion / not informative enough / mediocre / informative / very informative

27. Do you know what the word “wellness” means?

Yes / no

28. If you answered the previous question with a “yes”, describe shortly what kind of expectations the word “wellness” creates:

29. Describe shortly this image on the wellness page:



Image 2: Strand Spa website's Wellness homepage header image

30. Using the same image on every wellness page:

Did not notice / did not bother / no opinion / was unsettling / was distasteful

31. Mark two words in the following text that for you create an image of Strand Spa's wellness the best:

“In the wellness centre you'll feel the time stop as soon as you enter. Cosy milieu, professional attendants and nature-inspired treatments offer ideal relaxation for both the hotel guests and the residents of Pärnu. The treatments can be comfortably combined with other additional services of the hotel, so your day becomes even more memorable.”

32. What kind of pre-image the previous text creates about Strand Spa's wellness?

It does not / unclear / mediocre / good / very good / too good

33. Did you use the virtual tour function on Strand Spa website?

Yes / no

34. Describe shortly this image found during the virtual tour of the spa:



Image 3: An outtake from Strand Spa website's spa virtual tour

35. Strand Spa website was:

No opinion / boring / normal, average / interesting / very interesting

36. Based on website elements, the best pre-image was created by:

Image material / price list / descriptive text / virtual tour / other (name it)

Appendix 4: The complete set of answers to Q20 and Q33

	Q20	Q33
S1	Cosy, enjoyable	Perfect, relaxation
S2	Cosy, massage	Nature, relaxation
S3	Cosy, comfortable	Time-stopping, memorable
S4	Spa, pool	Professional employees
S5	Sauna, pool	Nature, relaxation
S6	Relaxation, comfortable	Procedures, relaxation
S7	Cosy, relaxation	Professional, procedures
S8	Enjoyable, relaxation	Procedures, relaxation
S9	Free, relaxation	Time-stopping
S10	Free, sauna	Procedures, relaxation
S11	Sauna, Jacuzzi	Cosy, relaxation
S12	Lava stones, Jacuzzi	First moment

RESÜMEE

KÜLASTAJA OOTUSED (EXPECTATIONS) LOODUD VEEBILEHEKÜLJE VISUAALSETE ELEMENTIDE POOLT ENNE SPAA KÜLASTUST

Enda esitlemine on oluline aspekt iga teenuse juures ja külastaja jaoks, kes loob teenusest teatud pildi, on tegu olulise eeldusega otsuste langetamiseks. Interneti võimaldab tänapäeval laialdaselt otsida üha rohkem teenuseid ja konkurente. Tuginedes teoreetilisele tõsiasjale, et interneti kasutus on muutnud ka külastajate käitumist (Mattila, 2004), on selle uurimustöö eesmärk luua arusaama sellest, kuidas veebilehekülje elemendid mõjutavad potentsiaalset klienti enne spaa külastust. Kuna spaa teenuste disain keskendub peamiselt külastaja elamuste loomisele asutuses kohapeal viibides, tekib huvi uurida, kuidas potentsiaalne klient *suhtleb* spaaga enne oma külastust. Nõnda pakub selle töö autor välja idee, et spaa veebilehekülg on oluline osa spaa teenusest ja seda ei tohiks teoreetilistest arutlustest välja jätta. Täpsemalt öeldes, seades tähelepanu spaa külastaja meeleolule enne tema külastust, saab selle uurimustöö peamiseks eesmärgiks luua parem arusaam spaa teenusest läbi kontseptsiooni *ootused (expectations)*.

Antud lõputöö teoreetiline taust on oma olemuselt kompleksne ja keskendub mitmele erinevale kontseptsioonile, sealhulgas internetitarbija käitumine, turismi semiootika, visuaalsed elemendid, nende edastamine, ja ootused. Tänu laialdasele teoreetilisele taustale annab töö põhjaliku ülevaate ootuste tekkest ning uurimusraamistikust tuletatud piirangud seavad ka kindlad piirangud meetoditele ja uuringus osalejatele. Piirangutest sõltuvalt viidi antud uurimus läbi tänu eelnevalt valitud grupele, mis koosnes 15 naisest,

vanuses 40–65, kes kuulusid uurimusobjektiga ühte kultuuriruumi, kellel olid varasemad kogemused ning kes viibisid veebilehekülje vaatamise ning vastuste andmise ajal individuaalselt suletud ruumis.

Töö põhi-kontseptsioon, *ootused*, viitavad individuaalsele arvamusele, ning seetõttu on meetodid tugevalt mõjutatud subjektiivse informatsiooni kogumisest ning analüüsimisest. Tuginedes Manski (2004) väitele, et verbaalse informatsiooni tõlgendamine on komplitseeritud, toimus andmekogumine hoolikalt valitud uuringus osalejatelt läbi järgmiste meetodite: sissejuhatavad küsimused, päevik ja küsimustik. Neist lähtudes, ning arvestades uurimuse teoreetilist tausta, on antud töö puhul tegemist lihtsa eksperimentaal-uuringuga (*simple experimental research*).

Tänu põhjalikule teooriale ja hoolikult määratud piirangutele nii uuringus osalejatele kui ka andmekogumise protsessile, viis sisuanalüüs (*content analysis*) autori arvates edukate tulemusteni. Põhitulemuseks osutus parema arusaama loomine *ootustest*, kus uuringus osalejate vastused viitasid sellele kui informatiivne teadmine ning ootuste olemus on positiivne. Lisaks sellele esines ka väga tugev tekst-elementi ülekaal teiste elementide veebileheküljel, nagu näiteks pilt, ning selle poolt loodud selged ootused omavad külastajale rohkem tähtsust. Vaatamata sellele on aga pilt-elementi tähtsus siiski põhiline eelarvamuse või ettenägemuse (*pre-image*) loomisel, kuid uurimustulemused viitavad sellele, et pilt loob (*co-creates*) selle tähenduse koos tekstiga.

Kuna töö tulemused tulenesid väiksele eksperimentaal-uuringule, siis esines uurimuses endas ka mitmeid piiranguid. Nendest piirangutest lähtudes tõi töö autor välja mitmeid soovitusi edasisteks uuringuteks veebilehekülje elementide ja ootuste vallas. Lisaks uuringus osalejate arvu suurendamisele, visuaalsete elementide laiahaardelisemale kasutusele, on edasise uurimise käigus võimalik keskenduda justnimelt tekst- ja pilt-elementide koosloome protsessile. Lähtudes analüüsitulemustest, ning arvestades seda, et ootused on informatiivsed ja ka positiivsed, siis saab ootuste teooriat ka laiendada läbi lingvistiliste lähenemistele.

Magistritöö autor soovib tänada kõiki naisi, kes osalesid antud eksperimentaal-uuringus ja aitasid luua paremat arusaama spaa veebileheküljest kui teenusest, mis loob ootusi

enne asutuse külastust läbi visuaalsete elementide. Uurimustööga soovib autor motiveerida innovaatilist mõtlemist spaa teenuste disaini maastikul ning pakkuda välja uut teoreetilist lähenemist heaolu- ja spaa teenuste disaini ja juhtimise erialale.

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