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**CREATING MEMORABLE WELLNESS EXPERIENCES
FOR CUSTOMERS IN LATVIAN SPAS**

Master thesis

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Recommendation for permission to defend 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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INTRODUCTION

The way companies are selling goods and services has changed. Economic transformation has led the society from agricultural economy to industrial revolution and service economy. In the world of so many goods, services and brands, customers are facing difficulties in the decision-making process, but businesses are confronted with bigger competition. Moreover, customers are becoming more demanding towards the service quality and offerings. Hospitality is one of the industries affected the most by the changing behaviours of the customers (Bühning, 2015, p. 21). Every business values happy and satisfied customers. The wellness industry is not an exception. Demand for the wellness services and products in recent years experienced high increase.

Spas are part of the service industry and customers are the driving force for wellness and spa establishments (Vryoni et al., 2017, p. 16). Service quality has a direct link with customer satisfaction, because customers evaluate things they see and can experience. Many research studies undertaken in the spa and wellness field explore customer satisfaction through the perspective of quality, using different theoretical models such as SERVQUAL (Langviniene & Sekliuckiene, 2008; Quintela et al., 2010; Vryoni et al., 2017). However, with the rise of the experience economy quality is not enough anymore. Williams (2006, p. 485) argues that in the changing economy and consumer behaviour, new and subjective concepts should be used to explore customer experiences viewing them “as emotional beings”. The economy has moved away from just selling the goods or offering services. Staging experiences is the next step of the economic progression described by Pine II & Gilmore (1998). Experiences are next level economy, where businesses create memorable and engaging events for their customers (Pine II & Gilmore, 2013, p. 26). However, some scholars oppose and Schmitt (2011, p. 68) argue that experience economy should be looked at as a new way to market goods or services rather than a new level of economy. Experience economy either it is looked at as a new level of

economy or a new marketing approach, is present, relevant and should be considered also by spa organisations.

The wellness industry is an example of the experience economy (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2015, p. 11). Wellness offers more utilitarian and hedonistic values and is often connected to experiences, luxury and 5-star hotels (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2015, p. 12; Konu et al., 2010, p. 129). Comparably to wellness, customers seek experiences not because they have to, but because they want to. Experiences are not a necessity, but a luxury (Sundbo, 2009, p. 435). Nevertheless, only a few studies have explored the concepts of experiences in the wellness industry (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2015, p. 3). The lack of studies which consider wellness as part of the experience economy is evident (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2017, p. 2). In general, customer satisfaction in a spa context is one of the most under-researched areas in hospitality (Prayag et al., 2018, p. 59; Buxton, 2018, p. 133). Nevertheless, there is a gap in research that focuses on customer satisfaction through the perspective of the experience economy. Customer experiences are a complex concept and difficult to measure only in terms of quality. The overall customer satisfaction should be based not only on the service quality, but also on evaluation of customer experiences (Mahdzar et al., 2017, p. 7574). With the rise of the experience economy more studies should be carried out in the fields such as hospitality, tourism and especially spas to understand what attributes form memorable experiences for customers (Bühring, 2015, p. 7).

The thesis problem is: the wellness sector is rapidly increasing and most of the wellness establishments focus on service quality. How could spa centres use online customer feedback regarding their wellness experiences to design memorable wellness experiences for customers?

The aim of the Master's thesis is to analyse the prospects of creating memorable experiences in Latvian spas – investigate currently offered wellness services, explore customer online feedback about their wellness experiences and make recommendations for spa managers how to improve their offered services.

This research will review customer satisfaction through the perspective of the experience economy proposed by Pine II & Gilmore (1998). The research questions of the thesis are:

- Which elements of the offered wellness services need to be improved in Latvian luxury spas to enhance customer wellness experiences?
- What type of memorable experience generators spas consider when creating wellness experiences for customers?

Main research tasks:

1. Review and analyse theoretical aspects of customer experiences within the wellness field.
2. Explore and create an overview of the currently offered wellness services in Latvia.
3. Evaluate what elements form the customer wellness experiences in Latvian Spa hotels.
4. Analyse which realms of the experience influence the overall customer wellness experience the most.
5. Recommend to spa managers how to design memorable wellness experiences for customers.

To better understand the wellness field in Latvia an overview of currently offered wellness services is provided. The empirical part covers luxury hotel spa customer online feedback from Booking.com and interviews with luxury hotel spa representatives. The empirical part employs qualitative research methods – netnography and content analysis.

This Master's thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter introduces the theoretical background of experience economy and its practical benefits, discussing the shift from service quality to service experience. The first chapter covers different experience frameworks, in particular *The four realms of experience* model by Pine II and Gilmore (1998). The first chapter concludes with the subchapter about memorable wellness experience creation. The second chapter represents the data from empirical research, the author first provides the overview of the Latvian spa industry and then introduces the research methodology. The final part analyses the research results. The second chapter also presents research conclusions and recommendations for spa hotel managers.

1. FROM SERVICE QUALITY TO SERVICE EXPERIENCE

1.1. Customer satisfaction and service dimensions

Assessment of the main components in the service industry such as quality, perceived value and satisfaction can help businesses to understand their customers (Choi et al., 2015, p. 267). Service economy is “an economy based on providing services rather than manufacturing or producing goods” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Service organizations serve their customers, so their opinion and satisfaction regarding the received service is very crucial. Spas are part of the service industry and customers are the driving force for wellness and spa establishments (Vryoni et al., 2017, p. 16). Service quality is one of the main factors which influences customer satisfaction (Vildová et al., 2015, p. 153). Service quality directly affects customer satisfaction towards received services (Quintela et al., 2010, p. 119) and also can increase customer loyalty (Poor et al., 2013, p. 34). Offering to customers high quality services helps to increase spa competitiveness and gain additional advantages from their competitors (Poor et al., 2013, p. 34).

SERVQUAL gap model by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry is “considered the foundation on which the studies of service quality have been conducted” (Cai & Alaedini, 2018, p. 2). SERVQUAL gap model and its five dimensions: responsiveness, tangibles, reliability, assurance and empathy are widely used to research customer satisfaction within the health and wellness industry. In the study by Vryoni et al. (2017, p. 13) SERVQUAL model was used to investigate the impact of service quality dimensions on wellness customers' satisfaction in spa centers in Greece. Willingness to help the customer (Responsiveness) was the factor with the strongest relationship with spa customers' satisfaction (Vryoni et al., 2017, p. 15). A study performed by Croatian researchers Marković and coauthors (2012, p. 55) used a modified SERVQUAL scale to explore the differences between wellness customer expectations and perceptions in

wellness establishments. This study showed that employees play a major role in meeting wellness customer expectations and providing service of a high quality. The employee importance in many studies that used SERVQUAL model “is emphasized by the fact that four out of the five SERVQUAL dimensions are related to staff performance” (Lo et al., 2015, p. 162).

Another study conducted in Hungary used a SERVQUAL model to explore if there are some differences “in the evaluation of the importance of various quality factors” between two customer groups – spa guests and patients (Löke et al., 2018, p. 124). The results did not show significant differences between two customer groups, however spa guests rated tangible quality factors higher than the patient group (Löke et al., 2018, p. 144). Albayrak et al. (2017, p. 218) used SERVQUAL model to explore the customer satisfaction with the spa and wellness services in a five-star hotel located in Antalya, Turkey. The main findings showed that the tangible attributes such as quality and maintenance of equipment, spa cleanliness has the biggest impact on the overall customer satisfaction. Additionally, such aspects as service hours of spa and safety precautions showed a bigger influence on customer satisfaction than competence and courtesy of the staff (Albayrak et al., 2017, p. 228).

Nunkoo et al. (2020) explored what service quality attributes positively influence customer satisfaction in South African hotels with different star ratings. Five dimensions of service quality such as accommodation infrastructure, employee expertise, room quality, safety and security, and waiting time showed significant influence on customer satisfaction. Employees' attitude and behavior, customer interaction, food and beverage quality, front desk quality and sociability did not positively influence customer satisfaction (Nunkoo et al., 2020, p. 6). In regards to hotel star rating, the results showed that following attributes had significant importance in customer satisfaction: accommodation infrastructure and employee expertise (for 1-star and 2-star hotels); room quality (for 3-star hotels) and, waiting time and customer interaction (for 4-star and 5-star hotels).

Although tangible elements, such as spa facilities, equipment, cleanliness and staff are an important part of customer experience, intangible factors play a major role in service quality (Marković et al., 2012, p. 56). Service quality within the wellness and spa industry

is a complex parameter to measure (Lo et al., 2015, p. 159). One cannot measure the objective quality of the treatment, because the customer satisfaction is based on his or her own perception of quality (Vildová et al., 2015, p. 153). Research done in Serbia revealed that customers place a higher value on intangible service quality attributes of the hotel such as “precision, accuracy, security, speed of service, staff’s courtesy and personal attention” (Marić et al., 2016, p. 23). Specifics of the wellness industry are related to subjectivity and intangible elements such as emotions, personal values and individual experiences.

Extensive systematic review of articles published in five hospitality journals between 2000 and 2016 showed that customer satisfaction has been widely researched particularly in the Hospitality industry (Prayag et al., 2018, p. 53). Customer satisfaction mostly is measured through service quality dimension. However, this review revealed the decline in the use of the gap model such as SERVQUAL in measuring customer satisfaction (Prayag et al., 2018, p. 60). To gather more reliable data, the model should be adapted within the different fields and specific service areas (Albayrak et al., 2017, p. 230). Cai and Alaedini (2018, p. 2) emphasise that SERVQUAL has its limitations due to the changing behaviour of customers in the emerging experience economy.

A comprehensive literature review undertaken by Bharwani & Jauhari (2013, p. 827) showed that studies about experiences in the hospitality industry focus more on such dimensions as material product, employee behavior & attitude, environment, interpersonal relations and less on technical quality of the experience. Experience “is a subjective and psychological activity ... often with important emotional significance” (Lo et al., 2015, p. 158). Experiences go more beyond the general service evaluation (like or dislike, satisfied or dissatisfied). Experiences “include specific sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioral responses triggered by specific stimuli in the consumer’s environment” (Schmitt, 2011, p. 64).

Companies are gathering customer satisfaction surveys to gain feedback regarding their performed services. Surveys provide a rather general opinion about how the service provider fulfilled (or did not) the customer expectations. However, these surveys do not show what customers actually want (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 19). Companies should focus not only on the services and how these services are provided but focus more on

their customers – their wants, specific needs and expectations. Pine II & Gilmore (2000, p. 19) argue that “a more memorable measure” is needed to understand customers. Authors suggest the 3-S model where businesses should focus on customer satisfaction, sacrifice, and surprise. Later, a fourth S was introduced as suspense (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 132). Companies embracing this 3-S model must go beyond “how we did and even what you want to what you remember” (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 22). However, businesses should increase the customer satisfaction first, before moving to customer sacrifice and surprise (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 23). Varela et al. (2014, p. 86) highlighted the differences between quality of service (QoS) and quality of experiences (QoE). While QoS relates more to concepts and measures of systems, QoE involves more utilitarian and hedonic characteristics. QoE is defined entirely from the customer perspective. Nevertheless, experience quality is as important as the service quality in experience creation (Chen et al., 2019, p. 1420).

Szromek & Naramski (2019, p. 2) emphasize another issue related to service organizations. There is a need to modernise the business processes in the spa service organisations as many tools used in the organizational processes are outdated. Authors stressed the importance of using different business models within spa establishment management to improve offered services. This can help the business to adapt to the fast-changing wellness market and customer demands as well as responding to customer needs (Szromek & Naramski, 2019, p. 5). As service organizations, spas should focus on customers and their experiences. This can be achieved by exploring new tools and methods used for understanding customers (Heinonen et al., 2010, p. 15). Schmitt (2003, p. 46) stresses that managers should use more customer feedback and individual experiences when designing or improving current offerings.

Customers nowadays are getting more demanding and prefer unique, innovative or even transformative experiences instead of generic service offerings. It is not enough anymore to receive just the massage or visit the spa, customers are seeking for more memorable experiences. So, customer satisfaction should be measured not only in terms of service quality, but looked at more from the experience perspective. Next subchapter discusses more in depth the changing economy – from intangible and customized services to memorable and personalized experiences. The author will try to answer the question

where the wellness and spa industry fits into the changing economy and customer behaviour.

1.2. Experience economy

The experience can be distinguished from the service by “standardization versus uniqueness, the level of guest participation required, and satisfying needs versus creating memories” (Sipe & Testa, 2018, p. 180). In hospitality, a stronger focus especially in the luxury segment should be put on the customers and experiences (Bharwani & Mathews, 2016, p. 416). Customers are not anymore passive bystanders but are actively involved in the creation of their experiences (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2017, p. 4; Heinonen et al., 2010, p. 11). However, the qualitative research done by Grénman & Räikkönen (2017, p. 3) among tourism industry experts shows that there is still a lack of customer centricity in new wellness product and service development in Finland, for example.

Customers interact with the businesses in order to gain additional value for themselves. And the value for the customer is not only the good or the service itself, but rather the whole experience staged by the service provider using different resources and supplements (Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 1; Grénman & Räikkönen, 2017, p. 4). The value that lies within the experience has greater significance to the customer than in service industry (Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 3). The economic value is one of the parameters as to why customers prefer one product or service instead of another. This shift in the economic activity is well described by Pine II & Gilmore (1998) in the progression of economic value – from extracting the commodities to staging experiences and guiding to transformations (see Figure 1).

Experience is created “whenever a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual” by creating personal and memorable offerings (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 15). They also emphasise that “commodities are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are memorable” (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020 p. 15).

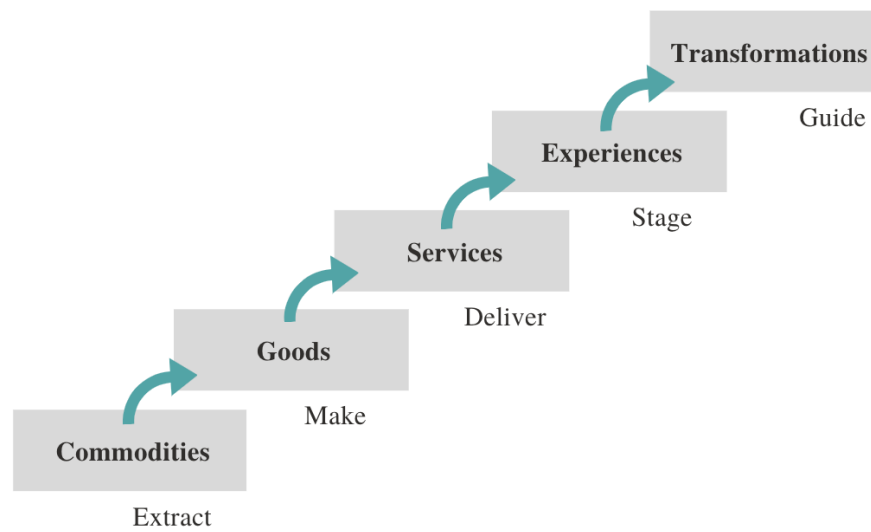


Figure 1. The progression of economic value. Source: Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 216

The Global Wellness Institute (Yeung & Johnston, 2018, p. 7) distinguish the Wellness economy and Spa economy as separate industries. “The wellness economy encompasses industries that enable consumers to incorporate wellness activities and lifestyles into their daily lives” and consists of ten varied sectors (Yeung & Johnston, 2018, p. 7). Spa economy is one of the ten sectors within the wellness economy and the third with the highest annual growth rate in the wellness economy sector (Gazzola et al., 2020, p. 7). It is evident that the wellness economy continues to develop alongside the increasing demand for the wellness services (Gazzola et al., 2020, p. 20). As many label wellness as a “billion dollar industry”, it is important to understand what individual customers want.

The experience economy indicates that customers are looking for more than mere products and services. They want to “experience new aspects of life or new places, be entertained and learn in an enjoyable way” (Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 3) through original and cross culture experiences (Bharwani & Mathews, 2016, p. 416). This also creates pressure for organisations to continuously innovate in order to offer new experiences to the customers and stay competitive (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2015, p. 13; Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 3; Dillette, 2016, p. 121). Experiences help to achieve high-level wellness “that increase one’s awareness or education, and enable growth” (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2015, p. 11).

The highest and final stage of the progression of economic value is transformation (Pine II & Gilmore, 2013, p. 32) – where experiences guide customers to transformations. Transformations are part of the wellness industry, especially in wellness tourism with different spiritual and meditation retreats. The framework of health-related consumption (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2015, p. 10) combines the illness and wellness continuum with the progression of economic value. This framework shows that transformation can lead to high levels of wellness. Wellness is closely connected to self-responsibility and self-discovery so experiences and transformations mainly occur within customers themselves (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2017, p. 15). Transformations can be both internal, such as spiritual and psychological and external, such as physical health and appearance (Voigt et al., 2011, p. 27). Self-transformation can be impacted by transcendence (meditation, encountering peace and calmness, also reflecting on your life) and indulgence (self-care and pampering). However, transcendence relates more to religious or spiritual retreats, while indulgence to spas.

In the service industry “the organisation should strive to maximize the quality by exceeding customer expectations” (Cai & Alaedini, 2018, p. 2). KPMG International (2020, p. 23) in their latest *Global Customer Experience Excellence* research stresses that organisations should find the balance between customer expectations and delivered experiences. This is important so the organisations are not wasting time, effort and money on things that actually do not give any value to the customer, but in return create extra operating costs. Also Pine II & Gilmore (2000, p. 22) argues that in the experience economy exceeding expectations should be rather replaced with the staging the unexpected (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 22). Service experiences should be looked not just as simple transactions, but a personal interaction between customer and service provider (Bharwani & Mathews, 2016, p. 428). And even the smallest detail in this personal interaction can be transformed to a memorable experience (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 5). The experience economy takes customer satisfaction to the next level – “to the point of delight before memorable experiences can be produced” (Bühning, 2015, p. 26). Some scholars oppose that delight is the highest state of memorable experiences (Rivera, 2018, p. 22). Service providers, especially in the wellness industry, should strive not only to satisfy their guests but to delight them.

Another important distinction is value for the customer where in experiential offerings memories and emotional value surpasses the functional value (Sipe & Testa, 2018, p. 181). Choi et al. (2015, p. 274) investigated how functional and wellness values impact the visitor experiences in a South Korean spa. Four quality aspects were identified – spa facility, spa program, staff and uniqueness. While functional value was more related to the quality of the tangible environment (facilities, cleanliness, water or service quality), wellness value relates more to physical, mental and emotional aspects (Choi et al., 2015, p. 275). They suggested that in the spa setting, wellness value has a greater impact on customer satisfaction than functional value. In this work, chapter two focuses on customer wellness experiences in the luxury spa hotels in 2020. During this year, customers and also businesses faced significant changes. KPMG International (2020, p. 6) emphasizes that due to the COVID-19, the values system for customers have changed. The economic impact that customers face due to the restrictions has shown that many customers put essential goods and services before other optional goods or services. 2020 has shown that the value of the product or service that customers get is more important than ever. Value for money also shows strong correlation for customer loyalty (KPMG International, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, customers are ready to pay a higher price for experiences that bring positive emotions (Cai & Alaedini, 2018, p. 5) and transform them (Jurowski, 2009, p. 1). Some studies emphasize that innovative services also add additional value and increase customer satisfaction (Langviniene & Sekliuckiene, 2014, p. 299). Innovations can be seen as a part of experience creation and is a crucial aspect for every business (Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 8). Understanding customer spa experiences can also help managers “to understand the determinants of revisitation and long-term attitudinal loyalty” (Choi et al., 2015, p. 264).

Another important factor that managers should consider in the emerging experience economy are employees. “The progression from service to experience requires a shift in how employees are viewed, managed, evaluated, and rewarded” (Sipe & Testa, 2018, p. 191). Authors suggest that hospitality industry managers should avoid standardization in guest interactions and consider more creative and unique approaches for employee interactions with customers. This especially applies to the spa industry, where each customer should be treated on a more individual and personal level. Employees with experiential intelligence are the key in order to move away from servicescape to

experiencescape as with their skills they can offer more individually tailored offerings (Chen et al., 2019, p. 1424).

Staging experiences are the next level economy and spas are part of this industry. Customers are seeking for more than just a satisfying service encounter, especially in the spas. Spa managers should consider wellness services beyond customer satisfaction, as memorable wellness experiences staged for the customers. In the changing economy it is crucial to identify what value customers seek in their offerings and how trained and skilled staff can help them to achieve it. This can delight customers, increase their loyalty and make them re-visit. However, spa managers “must constantly refresh their experiences and change or add elements that keep the offering new and exciting, and worth paying money to experience all over again” (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 21). The next subchapter explores more in depth customer experiences and what elements generate memorable experiences.

1.3. Customer experiences and dimensions

1.3.1. Experience frameworks

Each customer engages in the experience on a personal level, and the experience can be influenced by many factors such as emotions, feelings, interpretations (Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 6). But what are “dimensions and drivers of an experience” (Heinonen et al., 2010, p. 15)? From the reviewed literature three experience frameworks were highlighted (see Table 1). Though all frameworks have been developed from particular industries (eg. tourism or marketing), all three share some similarities. Experiences engage customers intellectually. Pine II & Gilmore (2020, p. 46) describes the educational realm as *want to learn* and Aho (2001, p. 33) emphasizes that informative experiences involve knowledge that tourists can gain during the trip. THINK marketing involves customers in a more creative way by making them solve the problems (Schmitt, 1999, p. 68). The educational realm involves absorbing the experience by actively “engaging the mind” (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 41). This realm offers customers either learn something from the experience itself or use the experience activities to learn a certain knowledge (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 52).

Table 1. Experience frameworks in different literature

Pine II & Gilmore (1998)	The four realms of the experience (4E): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• educational,• esthetics,• escapist,• entertainment.
Schmitt (1999)	Five types of experience marketing approaches: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• sensory experiences (SENSE),• affective experiences (FEEL),• creative cognitive experiences (THINK),• physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (ACT),• social-identity experiences (RELATE).
Aho (2001)	Four types of experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none">• emotional experiences• informative experiences,• practice experiences,• transformation experiences.

Emotions are crucial elements of the experience and they can be expressed as instant reactions or create a longer lasting “mental imprint” reminiscing a great experience or on the contrary, a negative one (Aho, 2001, p. 34). FEEL marketing involves customer emotions, highlighting the importance of emotion triggers that can help to build the experience (Schmitt, 1999, p. 61). SENSE marketing involves all customer senses and creates sensory experience. Also, the entertainment realm is strongly related to feeling and sensing the experience. Entertainment dimension allows customers to passively absorb the experience from the distance (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 102); making customers *want to enjoy* the experience (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 46). Involvement can be also active and customers can be fully immersed in the experience (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 102). Escapism realm is described as *want to go and do* (Pine II & Gilmore, 2020, p. 46). While practice involves activities improving already existing capabilities, transformation leads to more significant changes in personality or lifestyle (Aho, 2001, p. 34). ACT marketing challenges the customer to change their lifestyle, behaviour and do things in a different way (Schmitt, 1999, p. 62). The latest RELATE contains all of the above mentioned, and goes more beyond an individual’s personality (Schmitt, 1999, p. 62). This marketing approach uses brands or products that evolve as brand communities or subcultures, and customers want to become part of this community.

Godovykh & Tasci (2020, p. 5) reviewed experience concepts in current literature and proposed a new holistic experience framework. Authors suggest that “experience is the totality of cognitive, affective, sensory, and conative responses”. They emphasise that experience should be looked at as the totality of the customers before, during and after the experience consumption, including both positive and negative experiences. Also, Heinonen et al. (2010, p. 12) argue that experiences should not be limited only to the moment of the service consumption. Businesses who see customer experiences in a more holistic way “may be able to strengthen relationships with their most valuable customers and, in turn, increase customer retention, positive word-of mouth and profitability” (Voorhees et al., 2017, p. 269). Though this new model proposed by Godovykh & Tasci (2020) offers a different perspective to research the experiences in a more holistic way, it has not yet gained academic attention in studies. Nevertheless, the 4E model has been widely used in studies across different fields, especially in tourism to explore visitor experiences in: museums (Radder & Han, 2015; Bodnár, 2019), cultural sights (Allan, 2016; Rijal & Ghimire, 2016; Musa et al., 2017), casinos (Shim et al., 2017), agricultural parks (Mahdzar et al., 2017), wellness (Voigt et al., 2011) and spa tourism (Lo et al., 2013).

Bodnár (2019, p. 90) took the realm exploration further and in her doctoral dissertation explored the escapist realm in the museum context. She suggested that escapism is present in all realms of experience, and actually should not be highlighted as a separate realm. Especially in the spa industry, customers choose spa services to escape from everyday problems or routine. Radder & Han (2015, p. 455) in their research about the museum experience found out that edutainment (combination of entertainment and educational realms) has the largest effect on customer satisfaction in three South African heritage museums. Bühring (2015) in his doctoral dissertation explored which elements form the memorable experiences within the luxury hotels, especially in designing the hotel rooms. From the 4E model, entertainment and esthetics realms were the most dominant realms where current memorable experiences were formed (Bühring, 2015, p. 191). The entertainment realm prevailed in the casino visitor experience in South Korea as most of the casino visitors were highly absorbed in the experience but did not actively participate in gambling (Shim et al., 2017, p. 368).

With the four realms of experience framework, Pine II & Gilmore “conceptualized experience by reflecting on internal responses resulting from emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual levels of consumer engagement” (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020, p. 2). Shim et al. (2017, p. 368) highlighted that experience realms is a great framework to explore much deeper elements of the experience. This thesis explores wellness experiences in the light of the emerging experience economy, and the 4E model is used as a theoretical framework in the empirical part.

1.3.2. The four realms of experience model

Customers in the experience economy want individually tailored experiences where they can “immerse, entertain, escape and also learn new things” (Rijal & Ghimire, 2016, p. 53). The 4E model proposed by Pine II & Gilmore (2020, p. 50) indicates that multi-realm offerings create the richest and most memorable experiences for customers.

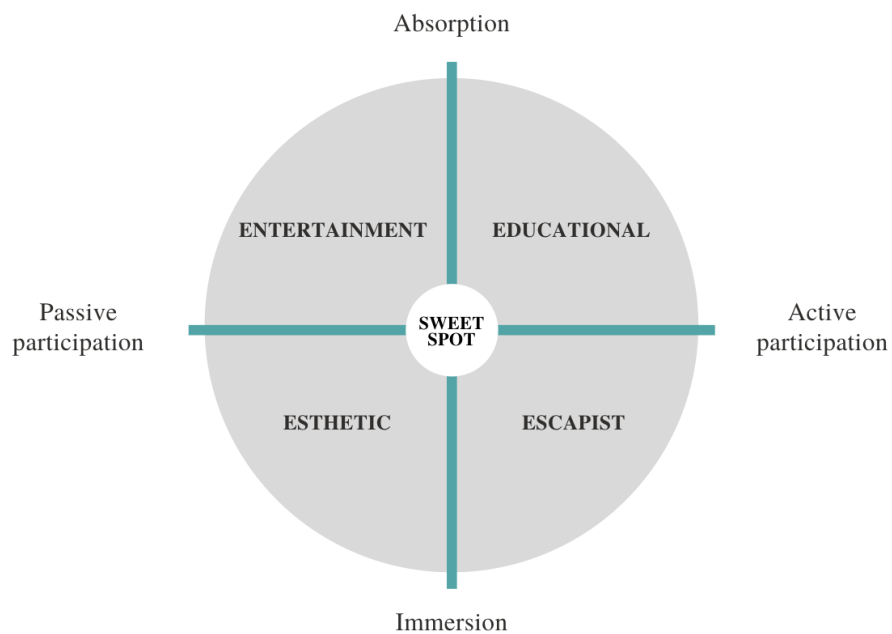


Figure 2. The four realms of experience. Source: Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 102

Usually, businesses engage customers into the experience through one dimension of experience. However, authors suggest that businesses should combine all four realms in order to create a sweet spot (see Figure 2). Experiences that combine all four realms creates strong memories and make customers come back.

Rijal & Ghimire (2016, p. 48) in their study about memorable experiences in Nepalese tourism described the four realms as:

- Education: Absorption of knowledge and engaging the intellect – about learning experiences;
- Esthetic: Passive immersion and special moments to remember – about being there;
- Escapism: Active immersion, participation and forgetting time – about doing;
- Entertainment: Passive absorption, seeing and listening – about sensing.

The entertainment realm is defined as the passive/absorption and escapist realm as active/immersion (Jurowski, 2009, p. 3). Wellness involves more hedonistic values such pampering and indulgence and is “viewed as a more passive enjoyment through, e.g. spa and beauty treatments” (Grénman & Räikkönen, 2015, p. 15). Experience involvement can be characterized as emotional, mental, social or flow-like involvement (Zatori et al., 2018, p. 118). High quality interaction from the service provider, interactivity and customisable services are the key elements which can lead customers to be involved in the experience. A higher level of experience involvement, the more authentic and memorable is the experience (Zatori et al., 2018, p. 117).

Lo et al. (2013, p. 429) explored Chinese spa experiences and identified six realms that influence the experience: aesthetics, escape, education, cure, transformation, reward and recognition. It is worth mentioning that the entertainment realm in spa experiences was not identified. It should be noted that the *sweet spot* also depends on the service type. Mehmetoglu & Engen (2011, p. 238) used the four realms of experience to compare the differences between experience realms among music festival goers and museum visitors. While escapism prevailed as a main satisfaction generator for festival visitors, education was the main satisfaction generator for museum visitors’ satisfaction. It is very important for spa managers to understand why customers choose their services? What are they looking for in the spa? While spa guests might want to be pampered and passively escape the daily routines, water park visitors might want to seek more entertainment and fun.

Bodnár (2019, p. 142) explored that in the museum context esthetic and entertainment realms directly influenced memorability of the museum experience and intention to re-visit. Esthetic realm is very important in spas as people visit spas to immerse in relaxation

with the help of the facilities, design and surroundings. Based on the customer experiences at a cultural heritage site, Musa et al. (2017, p. 15) categorized esthetic realm as physical ecstatic, cultural ecstatic and unpleasant ecstatic. Factors that can enhance the esthetic realm in spas are: “localized theme and environment, design, personalized and value-added service, professional skills and attitude, privacy and service distance” (Lo et al., 2013, p. 446).

While the educational realm involves more active participation, customers are still more likely to absorb the experience rather than immerse themselves in it like in the escapist realm. Lo et al. (2013, p. 446) notes that the educational realm can be enhanced by interaction and communication with customers also prior to visitation. This can include additional information about the treatment or specifics of facilities, so the customer is informed already prior to visit. Escapism in the spas can be enhanced also by design, localized theme and environment (Lo et al. 2013, p. 446). Though the initial 4E model describes escapism as active immersion, in a spa setting escapism experiences could be described as passive ones (Smith, 2021, p. 6). Not only luxury spa environment (layout, design, atmosphere), but also service delivery should correspond to the feelings of escape in order to create memorable experiences (Ali et al., 2014, p. 277).

The 4E model can be a useful tool when creating memorable experiences for customers. However, the model is not universal, as the *sweet spot* can vary from field to field. It is important to explore what factors can influence the memorability of an experience in a particular field, in this case – spas. The next subchapter gives an overview and design principles that should be considered by spa managers when creating memorable experiences for their customers. The author explores if memorability means exceeding the customer expectations, or can memorability also consist of micro experiences, something more personal and subjective than just an excellent service quality.

1.4. Memorable wellness experiences

Wellness services are of a high quality and are defined by place, atmosphere, settings, service, products, professional staff and “a touch of luxury” (Finnish Tourist Board, 2005, as cited in Konu et al., 2010, p. 129). Meeting customer expectations is the core of every service. In a spa setting, memorability is the key to satisfied customers, who will

remember the great experience and will be willing to return (Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 15). Carefully designed and thought through experiences can create memorable, engaging and sometimes even personal activity for customers. However, experiences can be designed also as micro – “small, subtle, affordable and memorable touch that resonates with customers for years” (Hill, 2017, as cited in Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 233). Determining what specific elements impact the memorability of an experience can be very challenging (Bodnár, 2019, p. 120; Buxton, 2018, p. 137).

Pine II & Gilmore (1998, p. 102) defines five experience-design principles that should be considered when creating new or improving existing services:

- theme the experience,
- harmonize impressions with positive cues,
- eliminate negative cues,
- mix in memorabilia,
- engage all five senses.

When creating experiences, attention should be paid to every detail of the customer journey in order to create a holistic and seamless experience (Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 13). In the experience economy it is all about the theme. Well-defined themes allow customers to fully enjoy the experience and attach memories to it. Themes allow customers to know “what to expect” before they even encounter the experience. Chen et al. (2019) highlights the importance of a theme also in experiencescape, where all elements should be aligned around a certain theme to create a successful experiencescape (Chen et al., 2019, p. 1416). “Simply put, going to a luxury spa is a holistic experience composed of heavily sensory-laden stimuli. ... An authentic spa experience involves an escape from the hustle bustle of people’s everyday lives” (Lin & Mattila, 2018, p. 48). Localized theme and environment showed significant importance in both esthetic and escapist realms of the Chinese spa experiences (Lo et al. 2013, p. 446). Managers can take into consideration also local culture, rituals or history when designing the spa theme (Lin & Mattila, 2018, p. 45). However, the spa theme and the experience it creates should be authentic. Experience offerings should be created using local and natural products as well as involving authentic, traditional practices (Ferrari et al., 2014, p. 6; Grénman & Rääkkönen, 2017, p. 9). Rijal & Ghimire (2016, p. 48) states that unique elements such as

traditions, culture or geographical location can create memorable experiences and lead customers to revisit the experience. Or on the other hand experience dissatisfaction and disappointment if the experience is not authentic and wrongly staged.

Cues are defined as very important elements that can either form a positive or negative experience. Cues create the overall impressions for customers and even the smallest cue can create a unique experience, as well as ruin it (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 103). Affective attributes should also be considered when creating the spa experiences (Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 231). Tung & Ritchie (2011, p. 1377) describe affect as emotions and feelings gained from the experience, both positive (e.g. happiness) and negative (e.g. frustration) emotions. That is why it is very important for spa managers to identify the “stimulus points in the spa journey” (Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 231) and how they can be incorporated or removed from the experience.

Memorabilia is all about the goods, that help the customers to store their memories about the events. Memory points (e.g. souvenirs bought on the trip) help visitors to recollect their travel experience (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1381). Spas sell different memory points such as towels, slippers or bathrobes with the spa logo, as well as products from cosmetic lines that are used in the spa treatments. Cosmetic products can also become part of the customer spa experience, when customers are offered free body scrubs or face masks in the saunas during the spa visit. These products can be purchased after the experience at the spa gift shop to resemble the great spa experience. Also, Lo et al. (2013, p. 447) note the importance of trying the spa cosmetic for free during the visit and prior to purchase. “Spa products that customers purchase and bring home can be part of their memory of their spa experience and, in return, increases their attachment to the spa” (Lo et al., 2013, p. 447). Memory points also can be used as a part of the spa ritual, which can help customers immerse in the experience (Ferrari et al., 2014, p. 8). If the business offers engaging experiences, customers will be willing to pay for the memory points that will help them to recollect their experience afterwards.

Pine II & Gilmore (2020, p. 22) highlights that it is important for managers to determine which senses affect the customers the most and use them in order to create an experiential service. Experiences involve all senses (Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 2). The more senses involved, the more memorable the experience (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 104). The

study by Reitsamer et al. (2020) explored how sensorimotor experiences (involving motor, tactile and visual stimulus) influence the creation of memories in the post consumption stage. The stronger sensorimotor associations were encountered during the service experience, the higher the possibility to remember the experience afterwards (Reitsamer et al., 2020, p. 484). These service experience memories afterwards develop positive word-of-mouth. This study suggests that managers should focus more on less satisfied customers and interact with these customers in the post consumption stage to “evoke past impressions and thus support retrospection and memory frequency” (Reitsamer et al., 2020, p. 485). This can be done through personalized content, that customer can afterwards also share online (e.g. photo from the water park slide).

Multi-sensory experiences can fully involve customers emotionally in the experience (Ferrari et al., 2014, p. 4). Emotions are the main trigger that make the experience memorable (Zehrer, 2009, p. 335; Bodnár, 2019, p. 123). Emotions can be stimulated by personal interaction (Bodnár, 2019, p. 123), or also by the brand. Some spas are emphasizing the brand in experience creation (Ferrari et al., 2014, p. 4), because positive emotions and memories can be attached to the brands and recognize these emotions when re-visiting the organisation again. From the reviewed hospitality literature customers and brand loyalty are the most important satisfaction enablers (Prayag et al., 2018, p. 65). Brands play an important role in the experience creation because brands create emotional attachment and memories (Cai & Alaedini, 2018, p. 2). “Sensory cues can activate brand-specific associations” which can lead to increased customer loyalty (Reitsamer et al., 2020, p. 485). These associations help to create “consumption-related memories” and create a memory imprint in customers' minds. Wallace & Smith (2020, p. 231) highlight attributes which managers should consider when designing sensory spa experiences: what customers see in a spa, what sounds they hear, what aromas they smell, what kind of touch they feel (both physical by the therapist, or spa textile), what tastes they can enjoy, maybe a spa can evoke a sixth sense?

Tung & Ritchie (2011, p. 1383) explored that four dimensions such as affect, expectations, consequentiality and recollection enables the experience to be memorable. Expectations are described either as fulfilling the customer intentions or exceeding their expectations. Wallace & Smith (2020, p. 231) note that spa managers should not only

reach the customer expectations but also ensure that the experience will remain in their memory long after. Moments of surprise significantly impact the memorability of the experience as customers encounter something new and unexpected (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1377; Sipe & Testa, 2018, p. 181). Surprise is “the single most important ingredient” for any business in order to create a memorable experience (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 21). Consequentiality strongly relates to memorability. It includes such aspects as new learning experience, personal growth, improving physical abilities and skills. Recollection helps to store the experience in the memory by sharing it with others. Storytelling strongly relates to experiences and helps to share past experiences, store memories, recollect the past events and build future expectations. Sharing experience with others also can help to build the expectation for those who are just planning to engage in the experience (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1380). Spa managers should take into account that customers with their online feedback also are “active co-creators of brand image” (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021, p. 386). Storytelling helps not only customers, but also businesses to promote their services. Positive word of mouth can increase spa popularity and attract new customers.

Co-creation is another element that offers not the experience itself but gives an opportunity for customers to co-create their own experience (Moscardo, 2018, p. 94). The co-creation in a spa setting can be personal treatment modifications, choosing favourite scent or oil for the massage, choosing the music during the treatment, or even choosing the favourite snack or drink after the treatment. Bharwani & Mathews (2016, p. 416) explored that personalized services customized specifically for individual hotel guests can create memorable experiences and help to connect to the customers on a more emotional level.

Another important attributes that spa managers should consider are physical behaviour and lifestyle; and social group or culture of a customer (Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 232). These two encompass another important aspect – well trained and skilled employees. Sipe & Testa (2018) explored services and experiences in relation to such variables as satisfaction, service quality and memorable experiences in the hospitality industry. The results revealed that esthetic and escapism realms significantly affect the creation of memorable experiences (Sipe & Testa, 2018, p. 189). This study showed also a strong

correlation between memorable guest experiences and employee interaction with the customers. In a spa setting personal interactions with the guests play a key role, especially because spa managers, spa receptionists or beauticians often are the face of the brand and sometimes even the only person with whom the customer interacts during the experience. Bharwani & Jauhari (2013, p. 832) proposed a hospitality intelligence (HI) framework with interpersonal intelligence competencies e.g. empathy, anticipating guest needs, conflict resolution skills which are vital for employees in creating a memorable experience for customers. This can contribute to shift in employees “from being merely a service provider to becoming an experience provider” (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013, p. 836). Another important competency aspect is cultural values and differences. Especially in a spa setting, employees should take into account guests' personal value and cultural differences (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013, p. 836). Organizations should “encourage their frontline employees to move away from normative and scripted behaviours and use their HI to creatively interpret the needs of their guests in unusual and exciting ways” (Bharwani & Mathews, 2016, p. 425).

Senses, emotions and different memory points help to generate memories about received service. The way how customers interact with the service (co-creation during the service or storytelling after) creates a mental imprint that helps to reminiscence the great experience. However, as memorable experiences are so subjective, they cannot be duplicated and experienced the same as in the first time (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1380). Experience creation should be looked at from a wider perspective, involving also organizational and managerial aspects. Pine II and Gilmore already states that experiences itself are memorable, however the identification of the elements of memorability in spa customer satisfaction should be done. The next chapter explores how customer online feedback can be used by hotel and spa managers in order to design a memorable experience for their customers.

2. WELLNESS EXPERIENCES IN SPA HOTELS IN LATVIA

2.1. Overview of Latvian wellness industry

Historical development of the Latvian health and wellness industry, as well as different perceptions of spa meaning can create a challenge in spa categorization. This work tries to provide a comprehensive overview of Latvian wellness industry, taking into account the definition of spa as “places devoted to overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit” (International Spa Association, n.d.) as well as linguistic meaning of the word spa – *sanitas per aquam* or healing through water.

Baltic countries and especially Latvia are known for its historical practices in balneology and peloid treatments. Nowadays tourists are also visiting Latvia to revive their health using Latvian rehabilitation programs and health care services. Besides balneology and rehabilitation programs Latvia is best known also as the suitable place for climatotherapy. “Latvia’s temperate climate, the energy of the forest and fresh sea air are well known” (Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, 2020, p. 12). Resort towns such as Jūrmala, Neubad and Ogre were popular places for wealthy people to enjoy sea bathing and walks at the seashore and pine forest during the summer months (Gurtiņa, 2012; Jūrmalas pilsētas muzejs, 2008; Ogres Vēstures un mākslas muzejs, 2019). With the increasing research about the healing properties of the Riga seashore (climatotherapy) and its local biological materials (peat, mud, water) new health resorts started to evolve around locations rich in natural resources (Ķemeri, Baldone, Jūrmala). The collapse of Soviet Union marked a decay of flourishing health resorts in Latvia due to the decreasing funding and visitor numbers (Ziemeļniece & Balode, 2019, p. 74). Eventually some resorts adapted to the changes but some were left for self-destruction. Few sanatoriums that survived to this day, have transformed to rehabilitation centers, old health resorts

turned into modern spa establishments and beautiful surroundings and parks turned into parking lots (Ziemeļniece & Balode, 2019, p. 76). In the early 20th century, the sanatoriums were meant for healing, while resorts more for wellbeing and leisure. However, Horsta (2018, p. 10) highlights that during the soviet times with the tuberculosis decrease, sanatoriums were more used also for prevention and physical rehabilitation using natural resources such as climatotherapy and balneology. The sanatoriums nowadays in Latvia are perceived as therapeutic, health strengthening places with wellness possibilities.

Wellness is closely connected to two (nature and health) out of four main categories mentioned in the Latvian tourism marketing strategy for 2018-2023 (Latvijas Investīciju un attīstības aģentūra, 2018, p. 23). Based on the health category description (see Table 2) the Latvian wellness industry can be divided into two sectors: the therapeutic sector (rehabilitation centres, sanatoriums) and spa sector (day spas, wellness hotels, public swimming pools).

Table 2. Health category overview

Category	Example
Wellbeing/spa tourism	SPA programs, detox, beauty care
Rehabilitation/Health-Resorts	Physiotherapy, medical rehabilitation, health resort treatments, incl. natural healing resources
Medical services	Diagnostics, stomatology, bariatric surgery, ophthalmology, oncology, orthopedy, infertility treatment, plastic surgery phlebology, dermatology
Traditional medicine	Traditional sauna, herbal teas, natural resources, activities in nature and forest

Source: Latvijas Investīciju un attīstības aģentūra LIAA, 2018, p. 23

Nature category includes seaside and beaches, forests, bogs, botanical gardens, parks and above all - fresh air. Both nature and health, as well as historical traditions are used to promote Latvia as a health and wellbeing destination. Many choose Latvia as a health destination based on various factors, the main being professional knowledge of local specialists, affordable and competitive service pricings, and treatment availability (Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, 2020, p. 7). In 2020, all together 53

medical institutions were registered at the Latvian Health Inspectorate as a medical tourism service provider (Veselības inspekcija, 2020). It should be noted that health resort services are also used by domestic tourists due to the government funded programs for medical rehabilitation. Sanatoriums are located in three different landscapes across Latvia – seaside, forest and river or lake spaces (Ziemeļniece & Balode, 2019, p. 68). In 2021, in Latvia there were altogether ten resort rehabilitation centers (G, Ušpele, e-mail, 15.01.2021), half of which are located in the historical seaside resort town of Jūrmala. Based on the available information on the resort websites, most of the health resorts also provide wellness services (see Table 3). The Latvian Health Tourism Cluster is one of the main organizations, which not only promotes therapeutic services, but also offers support and collaboration opportunities for cluster members. The cluster is part of the Latvia Resort Association, which aims to restore, maintain and support the historical resort traditions and practices (Latvian Health Tourism Cluster, n.d.) The cluster also provides a vast range of information on the available treatments and services, including also some spa service providers.

Table 3. Overview of resort rehabilitation centers in Latvia

	Ownership	Medical services	Wellness services
Yantarny Bereg (Amber Coast) sanatorium	foreign branch	x	
Sanatorium “Belorusija”	foreign branch	x	x
Jaunķemeri Resort Rehabilitation Centre	private	x	x
VAIVARI National Rehabilitation Centre	state	x	x
The Social Integration State Agency (SIVA)	state	x	x
Rehabilitation Center “Tērvete”	municipality	x	
Rehabilitation Center “Rāzna”	municipality	x	x
Rehabilitation Center “Līgatne”	municipality	x	x
Rehabilitation Center “Krimulda”	private	x	x
Rehabilitation Center “Baltezers”	private	x	x

Source: G, Ušpele, e-mail, 15.01.2021

However, in the case of the spa sector, the industry is more fragmented than the therapeutic sector (see Table 4). None of the associations provide some sort of classification or overview of available spas in Latvia, as well as member lists. Official association that provides certification for hotels (using the Hotelstars Union criteria and ratings) is Association of Latvian Hotels and Restaurants. Few of their member hotels have spa facilities, however this list is not comprehensive and does not provide the full picture of the spa hotels in Latvia. The lack of available information sources and up to date information regarding some associations, creates a lack of clarity about the aims of these organizations. The availability of many spa related associations and the lack of the centralized approach is evident. This also creates a challenge to provide a comprehensive overview or list with the available establishments offering wellness services. The author tries to provide the overview, using a compilation of different publicly available sources.

Table 4. Overview of associations related to spa sector in Latvia

	Main aim
Latvian Sauna and Spa Association (Latviju Pirts un SPA Asociācija)	development and protection of “pirts” (Latvian sauna) traditions, practices and cultural heritage
Latvian SPA Association Union (Latvijas SPA Asociāciju Savienība)	defends the professional interests of SPA specialists and promotes professional growth
Latvian SPA & Wellness Federation (Latvijas SPA & Wellness Federācija)	no information available
Baltic SPA Association (Baltijas SPA asociācija)	certification, consulting, training
Latvian SPA Specialists Association (Latvijas SPA Speciālistu asociācija)	no information available
Association of Latvian Hotels and Restaurants (Latvijas Viesnīcu un restorānu asociācija)	provides certification using the “Hotelstars Union” system

Spas in Latvia can be found in hotels, private manors, public municipality facilities and day spas. Due to the vast range of available day spas (mainly offering beauty care services) in Latvia, this type is excluded from the overview. Wellness services are provided mainly in establishments with accommodation options such as hotels (see Table 5). According to the statistical data, at the end of 2019, the highest number of categorized

hotels/spa hotels in Latvia were 3-star hotels (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2020, p. 11). However, the highest number of categorized hotels with spa and wellness centres on accommodation and hotel reservation system Booking.com are 4-star hotels. Hotels with the Spa and wellness centres on Booking.com offer different varieties of wellness services. Some hotels offer large water and relaxation centres, some offer authentic treatments but some may offer only sauna or hot tub. Manor spas are a unique aspect of Latvian spas that should be highlighted. Altogether nine spas are located in historic manor houses and castles – four spas with no star-rating, four spas with 4-star and one with 5-star rating. These manors provide not only saunas, swimming pools and authentic treatments, but also uniqueness. Manors are located in historical buildings located in beautiful countryside landscapes, which can benefit not only to physical and emotional, but also spiritual and intellectual dimensions of wellness.

Table 5. Number of establishments offering spa and wellness services in Latvia

	Uncategorized	1-star, 2-star hotels	3-star hotels	4-star hotels	5-star hotels
Hotels and Spa hotels in Latvia at the end of 2019	110	5	55	50	14

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2020, p. 11

Hotels with the Spa and wellness centre	54	1	14	19	11
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Source: Booking.com

Due to the available funds and grants public swimming pools have been widely developed in recent years as another type of wellness service provider in Latvia (see Table 6). Only five public swimming pools are located in the capital Riga, with the highest number being located in rural areas. Most of the swimming pools (33) are 25 m long, two are 50 m and one is 16 m long. These facilities are not limited only to the swimming pool, but also offer saunas and different spa services (salt rooms, some basic treatments). For example, the town of Bauska built a new public swimming pool offering four different saunas, 25 m long swimming pool, kids pool and hydromassage baths. Also, aqua aerobic and swimming classes are available for free for local residents (Bauskas novada pašvaldība, n.d.).

Table 6. Number of public swimming pools in Latvia

	Total	Of which with saunas	Of which with whirlpools	Of which with kids' pools
Government and municipality owned public swimming pools	29	27	12	21
Academic institution owned public swimming pools	7	6	1	5
Total	36	33	13	26

Source: government and municipality websites

Public swimming pools mainly are funded by the municipalities, some belonging also to academic institutions. Taking into account accessibility and the variety of wellness services offered at public swimming pools, these establishments can be also considered as spas.

2.2. Research process

Extensive systematic review of hospitality articles revealed that most of the studies (80.3%) used quantitative methods to determine customer satisfaction (Prayag et al., 2018, p. 62). There is a lack of studies which explore customer satisfaction using qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods are suitable for exploring customer experiences (Bühning, 2015, p. 107), as experiences are person-specific and highly subjective and emotional (Teixeira, 2010, p. 13; Bravo et al., 2019, p. 389). Qualitative approaches are also used less in studies exploring spa context (Buxton, 2018, p. 136). In order to answer the research questions, the empirical part employs qualitative research methods (see Table 7). Qualitative content analysis is a systematic research method where “researchers subjectively examine textual materials” (Shim et al., 2017, p. 363) and compress “many words of text into fewer content categories based on rules of coding” (Sangpikul, 2019, p. 527). This research follows a six-step framework used by Sangpikul (2019) in the analysis of customers’ e-complaints. The six-step framework includes: “familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report” (Sangpikul, 2019, p. 528).

Table 7. Empirical research overview

Methods and criteria	
1. Content analysis	Task: explore and create an overview of the currently offered wellness services in Latvia. Data source: secondary data available online from The National Health Service, The Latvian Health Tourism Cluster and Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia.
2. Netnography (Content analysis)	Task: evaluate what factors form the customer wellness experiences in Latvian Spa hotels. Data source: secondary data available online on Booking.com Type of data: customer online reviews and ratings Sampling type: Non-probability quota sampling
3. Interviews (Content analysis)	Task: analyse which realms of the experience influence the overall customer wellness experience the most. Data source: primary data from semi-structured interviews with spa experts Sampling type: Non-probability quota sampling

This method is expected to provide core tendencies and patterns about spa experiences among both: spa visitors and spa managers (Shim et al., 2017, p. 364). Justification of the chosen methods, sampling criteria and sample size is discussed more in depth next.

To understand customers' overall wellness experiences, wellness customer feedback posted online on Booking.com for luxury spa hotels in Latvia for a period of one year (2020) was gathered, reviewed and analysed. The research process for customer online reviews is as follows: identifying spa establishments, setting the criteria for sample selection, data collection and data analysis (Sangpikul, 2019, p. 526).

Sampling for spa establishments was performed using pre-set criteria on Booking.com in March 2021:

- property type: hotels;
- star rating: 4-star and 5-star hotels;
- location: Latvia;
- facilities: spa and wellness centre.

Initial sample size: 35 hotels fit the criteria. After reviewing the sample size eleven hotels were removed. Two hotels were newly listed and did not have any ratings yet, five hotels

did not have any spa related reviews and four hotels had diamond (special rating given by Booking.com) not star rating. Final sample size: 24 hotels.

Sampling for reviews was done using pre-set criteria:

- Reviews posted in 2020;
- Traveller type: all reviews (solo travellers, couples, families, groups);
- Traveller country of origin: Latvia (as indicated on the Booking.com profile).

To ensure that all comments left by Latvians in 2020 are covered, the search was done using keywords in three languages – Latvian (spa, sauna, pirts, baseins, procedūra, masāža), English (spa, sauna, pool, massage, treatment) and Russian (спа, сауна, баня, бассейн, массаж). All reviews were retrieved manually and added to the general datasheet. After reading the comments, initial interpretive codes were added. When the initial coding was done, main themes and subthemes were identified along with the sample quotes (see Appendix 1; Appendix 2). Due to the complexity and cost of the text mining softwares, in this research MS Excel was used to gather, combine and analyse the data.

All reviews that fit the research criteria were filtered from the Booking.com and manually added to the code book (MS Excel). After all reviews were gathered, Excel automatic function was used to remove the possible duplicates. Along with the review itself, the following data were obtained from Booking.com and added to the code book: personal rating, type of traveller, gender and information if the hotel has replied to the review. Analysis began with familiarization — reading through the reviews within each language while marking the initial codes and possible themes. Special attention was paid to review content regarding spa experience. During the familiarization phase an additional remark was made which indicated if the review content regarding the spa experience is positive/negative. This was possibly due to the fact that review on Booking.com is split into two sections — one indicating negative and another indicating positive aspects of the experience (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Booking.com review example

After all the reviews were coded, possible themes were reviewed and main elements that impact overall wellness stay were defined. In the following step initial spa codes were reviewed in more depth in order to define main elements that impact particularly spa experience.

Luxury hotels were chosen because wellness is related to the “five-star settings, high-quality, even luxury” (Grénman & Rääkkönen, 2015, p. 11). In Finland, as defined by the Finnish Tourist Board (2005, as cited in Konu et al., 2010, p. 129) “wellness, above all, includes high quality concerning place, atmosphere, settings, service, products and professional staff ... which also includes a touch of luxury”. Five star hotels “provide a memorable experience through virtually flawless service and the finest of amenities. Staff are intuitive, engaging and passionate, and eagerly deliver service above and beyond the guests’ expectations” (Forbes Travel Guide, 2013, as cited in Bühring, 2015, p. 42). Spa visits are often connected to the “luxurious environment ... conducive to pampering and indulgence” (Voigt et al., 2011, p. 27). Luxury hotels offer unique, innovative and personal offerings which create in return memorable experiences for customers (Bharwani & Mathews, 2016, p. 422).

Domestic tourists were chosen, because there is a lack of studies that focus on local customers and their experiences. Many studies have explored wellness in the context of tourism. Ranging from wellness tourism industry reports (Yeung & Johnston, 2018), wellness tourism in general (Dillette, 2016), wellness destinations (Buxton, 2018), also developing wellness tourism products (Konu, 2015) and exploring wellness tourist spa

experiences (Lo et al., 2013). While many studies in the wellness tourism sector are focusing on foreign tourists and their experiences, the studies on the domestic market are somehow limited. “Domestic tourism gets oftentimes marginalized, staying unknown and rarely researched” (Szromek & Naramski, 2019, p. 5). Domestic tourism is also viewed as having less economic value than international tourism. However, the changes in the economic situation and consumerism as a result of a pandemic should not be ignored. The year 2020 changed many things, also the travel when many customers chose domestic offerings in local establishments (Glusac, 2021, p. 88). In addition, domestic tourists are looking for new and exciting experiences in the local environment (Langviniene & Sekliuckiene, 2014, p. 299).

Buttle (2009, as cited in Teixeira, 2010, p. 13) suggests that ethnographic methods such as participant observation are useful methods to explore customer experiences. Living in the age of the internet and social media, computer-mediated communication channels are a great source for collecting customer experience feedback. This can be done with the help of netnography – online ethnography research with the focus on humans and human experiences on the internet and devices (Kozinets, 2015, p. 4). Kozinets (2015, p. 7) criticizes that many research methods used in studies “dehumanize our humanity into numbers and other decontextualized and decontextualizing descriptors”. While netnography focuses on humans and explores their stories (Kozinets, 2015, p. 4). Netnography is a flexible research method that can be used to explore customer experiences shared online (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018, p. 659). The most comprehensive research done by Heinonen & Medberg (2018, p. 657) provides a systematic review of published netnographic research (between 1997 and 2017) in the marketing journals. This study shows that netnography is used across a wide variety of fields, including tourism. Netnography is a quick and in-expensive method that can help managers “to extract the information that helps create value for the consumer” (Whalen, 2018, p. 3424). Thus, many researchers criticize the misconceptions of netnography in the studies. Whalen (2018, p. 3430) opposes that methods for studying cultural communities or group communication through online platforms should be differentiated. It is argued that reviewers on online platforms cannot be categorized as community. Yet, the online booking platforms share some commonalities with online community characteristics proposed by Whalen (2018, p. 3429). Booking.com have community members (both

accommodation hosts and guests), who interact with each other via hotel reviews or travel discussion forums by sharing experiences and common interest in travel. As mentioned earlier, this research uses content analysis to analyse the data from netnography and interviews. “Without denying its ethnographic relevance, it appears even more legitimate to classify or position content analysis of online communications in between discourse analysis, content analysis and ethnography,” (Langer & Beckman, 2005, p. 193). This research adapts a non-participatory (passive) approach for data collection (Whalen, 2018, p. 3437).

Online platforms such as Tripadvisor.com provide great insights about customer tourism experiences and opinions (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018, p. 661). Kim & Park (2017, p. 787) emphasise that reviews on different online platforms sometimes are valued more than reviews in more traditional media sources. Customer online feedback shared with others is also the best advertisement for business (Vildová et al., 2015, p. 165). Online customer reviews are free and easily accessible information that can give to the service managers a rich insight about customer experiences and areas for improvements (Browning et al., 2013, p. 29). Online reviews are user generated textual content that “can reflect customers’ consumption experience and perceptions in more detail” (Zhao et al., 2019, p. 112). Lo & Yao (2019, p. 54) emphasize the importance of online hotel reviews, especially hotels should pay attention and reply to negative comments as this can show hotel efforts “in handling negative comments.” Spa managers should actively engage in online booking communities to gain benefit for the business and co-create the services together with the customers (Costello et al., 2017, p. 9).

Dillette et al. (2016, p. 2) used netnography to research what factors influence wellness experiences among wellness travellers on Tripadvisor.com. After reading all the reviews, four main themes and interpretive codes were identified using text mining software. Results were then analysed based on the dimensions of holistic concept of wellness. Sangpikul (2019, p. 528) used Tripadvisor.com reviews regarding day spas in Thailand to explore both positive and negative comments regarding spa tourist experiences. Comments were themed and analysed within the service quality dimensions of SERVQUAL model. Another study used hotel online reviews on Tripadvisor to explore the connection between different technical attributes (e.g. readability, length,

subjectivity) and overall customer satisfaction (Zhao et al., 2019). The research revealed that “online reviews of longer length lead to lower customer ratings” (Zhao et al., 2019, p. 118).

The author decided to use Booking.com for the netnography research based on the reasons described below. In the research pre-preparation phase, two of the world’s biggest online booking platforms such as Booking.com and Tripadvisor were reviewed. Using the research criteria, initially Booking.com showed 35 and Tripadvisor 33 luxury hotels with spa facilities in Latvia. Later, four hotels from the Booking.com list were removed as they were marked with the diamond rating (special Booking.com award representing accommodation quality) not star rating as set in the research criteria. The initial comparison showed that the number of reviews posted for these hotels on Booking.com exceeds the ones posted on Tripadvisor. Using *randbetween* function in MS Excel, randomly three hotels from the luxury hotel segment list were chosen and the number of reviews were compared (see Table 8). In some cases, the number of reviews on Booking.com were even double.

Table 8. Number of reviews

Luxury hotels	Booking.com	Tripadvisor
Port Hotel (4-star)	773	51
Bellevue Park Hotel Riga (4-star)	2 801	1 165
Grand Poet Hotel by Semarah (5-star)	3 016	640

Another important factor which influenced the final decision on the choice of platform was the search engine capabilities. In order to use the set research criteria and filter the reviews accordingly, the search capabilities of both platforms were compared (see Table 9). While general comparison showed no significant differences, there are a few important factors to mention. First, the main review criteria was to gather only comments left by Latvians. Booking.com offers a much broader language filter that allows to select the reviews from 35 languages, including Latvian and Russian, while Tripadvisor offers only Russian.

Table 9. Search engine capabilities

	Booking.com	Tripadvisor
Review rating	Rating number (1-10)	Green circles (1-5)
Filter options	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Traveller rating● Traveller type● Language (35 options)● Filter all reviews by date (newer/older)● Filter all reviews by rating (lower/higher)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Traveller rating● Traveller type● Language (7 options)● Time of year (months)
Search by keywords	Yes	Yes
Reviewer identification	Name, picture, location and country flag	Name, picture and location

Another factor in favour for Booking.com was that each reviewer is identified by their country flag, which makes it easier to track which comments to include or exclude. This is especially important because it was set in the research criteria that reviews will be gathered from Latvians, but they can be written in Latvian, Russian or English languages. Also, the reviews can be filtered by the date, which allows to select newest reviews at the top. As this empirical study is analyzing the customer reviews from 2020, this filter option is very useful as in most cases, the hotels do not have many comments already for 2021. It is also important to note that on Booking.com the review ratings were expressed in numbers not circles. The author considered that this will offer more options to compare different reviews.

Booking.com (n.d.) guest review guidelines indicate that “only a customer who has booked through Booking.com and stayed at the property in question can write a review. This lets us know that our reviews come from real guests, like you”. It should be noted that there are many other online platforms which are used in user-created content analysis within the Tourism and hospitality field. Kim & Park (2017, p. 790) used online reviews on such travel platforms as Tripadvisor.com, Hotels.com, Expedia and Booking.com to compare online review ratings with traditional customer satisfaction indicators in one hotel chain in the USA. The results showed that “social media review ratings play an

essential role in predicting hotel performance” (Kim & Park, 2017, p. 788). Other scholars explored customer experiences by analysing the comments and reviews on home rental service Airbnb (Cheng & Jin, 2019, p. 58).

Studies exploring customer experiences in different fields such as spas (Lo et al., 2013), luxury hotels (Bühning, 2015; Bharwani & Mathews, 2016), wellness tourism (Voigt et al., 2011; Dillette, 2016) and museums (Bodnár, 2019) have employed semi-structured interviews. This qualitative method allow researcher to use the same set of topics with the possibility to adapt the questions during the interview if needed. Semi-structured interviews with spa experts were conducted after the netnographic research was concluded. Prior to the interviews spa experts were briefed about the netnographic research, however the results from the reviews were not disclosed. Non-probability quota sampling was employed using the same criteria as in the netnographic research: 4-star and 5-star hotels with spa facilities. All spas at the hotels that fit the criteria (24 hotels) were asked to participate in the semi-structured interviews.

The interview planning stage coincided with the government restrictions when all spa centres were closed. Different communication channels (e-mail, telephone, zoom) for interviews were proposed for the spa representative’s convenience. Altogether four spa representatives agreed to participate in the interviews and share their opinions and experiences via interviews (see Table 10). As one expert is a Spa strategic manager and daily manages three spas in luxury hotels, spa experts represented altogether six spa centres from the total sample of 24 hotels. All interviews were conducted between March and April 2021 – three interviews by telephone and one interview through e-mail.

Table 10. Spa representatives

	Title	Representation
Expert 1	Former Spa therapist & Spa receptionist	Spa centre in 4-star hotel
Expert 2	Sales & Marketing manager	Spa centre in 4-star hotel
Expert 3	Spa manager	Spa centre in 5-star hotel
Expert 4	Hotel chain Spa Strategic manager	Spa centres in three 4-star hotels

The interview questions with luxury hotel spa experts were prepared beforehand and cover four sections (see Appendix 3). To analyse which realms of the experience influence the overall customer wellness experience the most, questions were created based on the 4E model – entertainment, education, escapist and the esthetic. This approach helped “to explore the patterns in experience and group them within the dimensions” (Musa et al., 2017, p. 10). Interview questions were sent to the experts prior to the interview execution date. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, following the same six step framework for content analysis used in netnographic research “familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report” (Sangpikul, 2019, p. 528). Interviews shed light on specific elements or attributes that might affect the overall customer wellness experience and create memorable wellness experiences for customers in Latvian luxury hotel spas.

2.3. Results

2.3.1. General customer wellness experiences in Latvian Spas

All together 696 reviews regarding spa experiences in luxury spa hotels in Latvia for 2020 were collected. Based on the previous set research criteria, all of the reviews were left by Latvians (indicated on Booking.com settings as nationality). The most reviewers were females (see Figure 4), and 9% of the reviewers did not indicate their name and left a comment as anonymous.

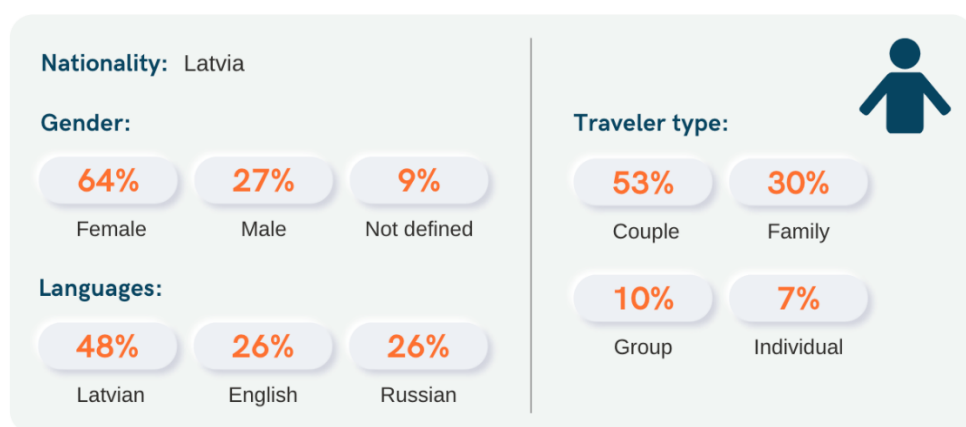


Figure 4. Booking.com wellness reviewer profile

Reviews were equally written in both English and Russian, but the majority (48%) were written in Latvian language. The most reviews were left by guests who travel as a couple (53%), but the least reviews were received from group (10%) or individual (7%) travellers. Most of the reviews were left for 4-star hotels (85%), while 5-star hotels received significantly less reviews (15%). This can be explained with the fact that most of the hotels that fit the research criteria are 4-star hotels (18 out of 24 hotels). The top three hotels with the highest number of reviews were 4-star hotels, two of them located in Jūrmala and one in Riga. Two 4-star and one 5-star hotel belonging to the big hotel chains and located in Riga center received only few comments. On average, big chain hotels are more expensive and preferably domestic tourists for travel purposes choose to stay in hotels outside the capital.

The longest review was left in English language for a 4-star hotel and consists of 597 words, with a personal rating of 7 (good). The average personal rating for lengthy reviews (more than 300 words) was 6.3 (pleasant). It should be noted that even if the review received very low ratings (1–3), the readability, emotional tone and language used was very polite and adequate. In negative reviews abusive language or multiple punctuation marks (expressing dissatisfaction) were not used. Whereas in positive reviews several exclamation marks or smileys were used to indicate the customers great satisfaction with the experience. It should be stressed that overall Latvian customers provide constructive and detailed feedback. Whether the review received a high or low rating, reviewers identified both satisfactory and dissatisfactory elements of their experience.

Most reviewers were satisfied with their overall wellness stay (see Figure 5) and rated their stay in luxury hotels as exceptional (33%), superb (26%) and very good (20%). Reviews that received low ratings (1–3) were less than 3%. In general, Latvian customers rate their experiences in luxury hotel spas as positive, and the average given rating to luxury properties was 8.5.

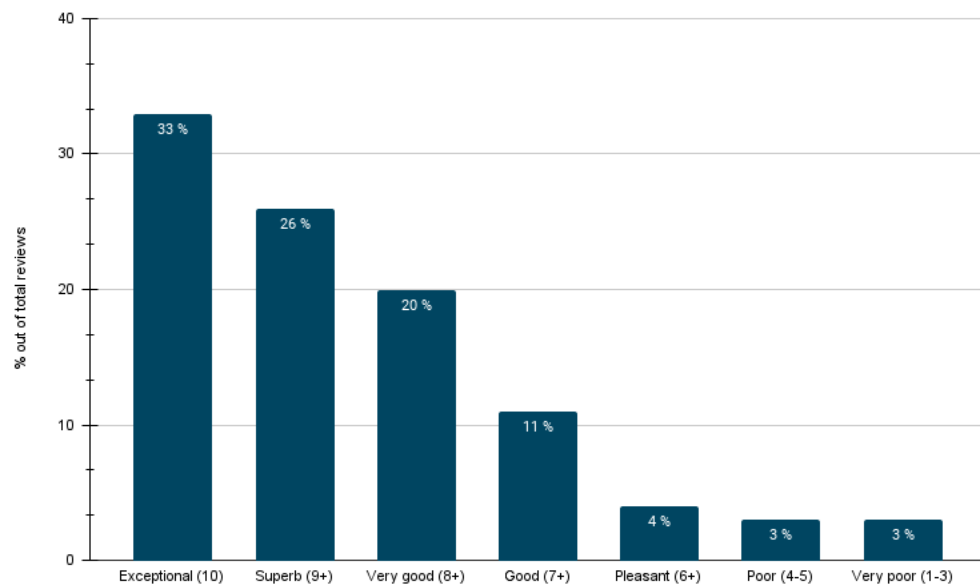


Figure 5. Total reviews per received Booking.com rating (n = 696)

After analyzing all the reviews, nine main themes that impacted the overall wellness stay in 2020 were identified (see Figure 6). From all the selected reviews, frequently mentioned themes were: food (72%), staff (44%) and room facilities (43%). Most of the reviews regarding food mentioned such keywords as breakfast, restaurant, coffee and tasty. Staff was the second most frequently mentioned theme, which shows how important employees are in the hospitality industry. Regarding room facilities – most guests appreciate the overall comfort of the room, especially bed, bedding and pillows. But mention was also made of such in-room facilities as air conditioner and coffee/tea maker options. Every sixth review regarding room facilities mentions bathrobe and slippers. Guests staying in the spa hotel, especially in the room with spa access sees bathrobe and slippers as a basic need: “Little unsatisfied with missing robes and slippers for spa which should be in the room as we had included spa access. But everything was cleared out right after we discovered that these things were missing.” (Female, couple staying at 4-star hotel, rated their stay: 7). Some hotel guests emphasised that bathrobes and slippers should be included already in the room price: “It was unpleasantly surprising that bathrobes and slippers were available only for a separate fee, because in the SPA hotel I would like them to be freely available and already in the room!” (Female, group staying at 4-star hotel, rated their stay: 8.8).

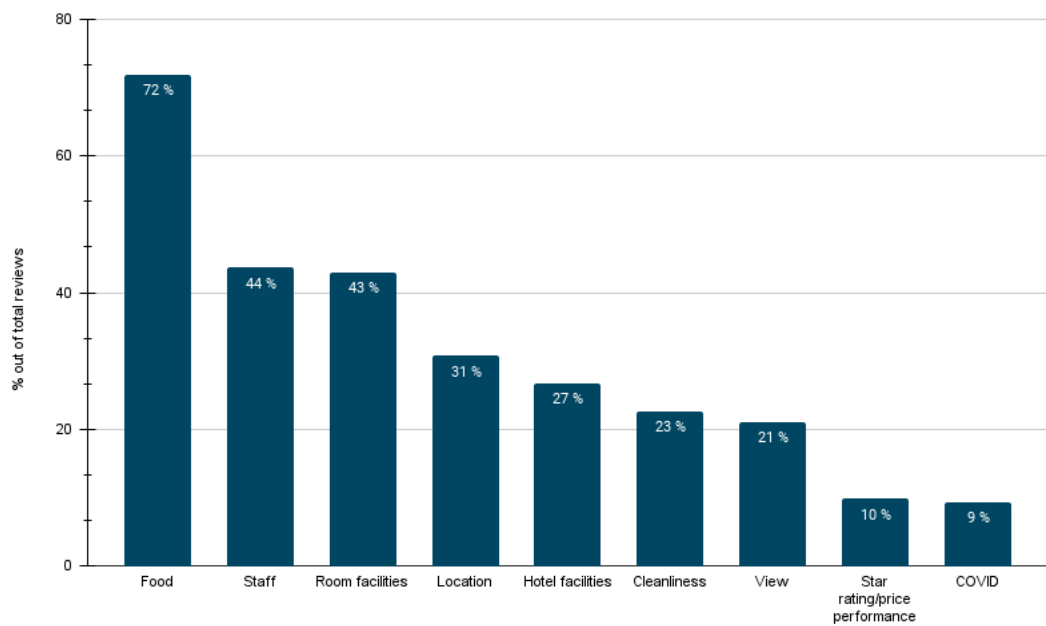


Figure 6. Hotel stay experience elements for luxury spa hotels in Latvia for 2020 (n = 696)

Guests mostly appreciate the view from their rooms (21%) but highlight also beautiful landscapes seen from the restaurants or terraces. Also, the location (31%) of the hotel itself is important as it definitely adds to the options for spending free time around hotel. Hotel facilities (27%) were mentioned less than room facilities (43%), however such aspects as parking, interior/design and crowding were indicated frequently. Crowding especially was mentioned in the case of check-in lines. Some reviews under crowding theme also indicated dissatisfaction with the ongoing events at the hotel premises, which can notably impact the overall satisfaction of the stay:

It turned out that a corporate event was held during our stay at the hotel. The hotel was crowded, no fun and relaxation ... We will definitely not return here, we got to the crowded market square instead of the hoped peaceful rest. (Female, family staying at 4-star hotel, rated their stay: 1)

The least mentioned indicator, but nevertheless important was star rating and price. The reviews revealed that when guests are visiting star rated facilities, they have their own set of expectations. And if the expectations are not met, they highlight price performance and feel disappointed:

I took the simple, classic room, but it was on the ground floor, windows overlooking the cars in the parking lot, but oh well. It is a pity that such rooms are generally available in a 5-star hotel. Cracked mirrors, rust and debris in the bathroom, brown water for the first minute. After a 2-hour massage, only a plastic glass of water was offered. All and all for their level you would expect at least a cup of tea. It seems like little things, but this is what makes the overall impression. (Female, individual staying at 5-star hotel, rated their stay: 8)

It should be noted that 2020 was a challenging year, especially for the travel and wellness industry. As Covid-19 related keywords such as restrictions, safety, disinfection, restricted access were noticeable in the reviews (9% from all comments), the author decided to add Covid-19 as a separate theme to the indicator list that impacted the wellness stay at the luxury hotels in Latvia in 2020.

Spa theme is not included in the above mentioned nine themes as all of the sample reviews already contain spa related keywords. Reviews regarding spa experiences are analysed separately and in more depth. During further spa experience analysis part of all reviews (22%) were indicated as too general (e.g. lovely spa, great spa, nice spa) for further in-depth content analysis, so they were removed from the general sample (n = 696). Altogether ten main themes (see Figure 7) that impacted hotel guests spa experience were identified from the sample (n = 542).

Less than a half of all reviews (40 %) mention spa facilities, namely wet and dry areas of the spa. Reviewers often listed the number of the saunas available, commented on the size of the pool and highlighted other possibilities at the spa: “SPA area is great! Good saunas and pools with underwater massages. I was especially pleased with the salt sauna, where I could scrub the body with salt and wash it off right in the sauna.” (Female, group staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 10)

Though many reviews highlighted the presence of the facilities, many mentioned also the lack of it:

It is unfortunate that there is no swimming pool and not even a jacuzzi in the spa area, which I thought should be mandatory in a place called a spa, but it is good

that it was compensated by a bath in the room. (Female, couple staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 10)

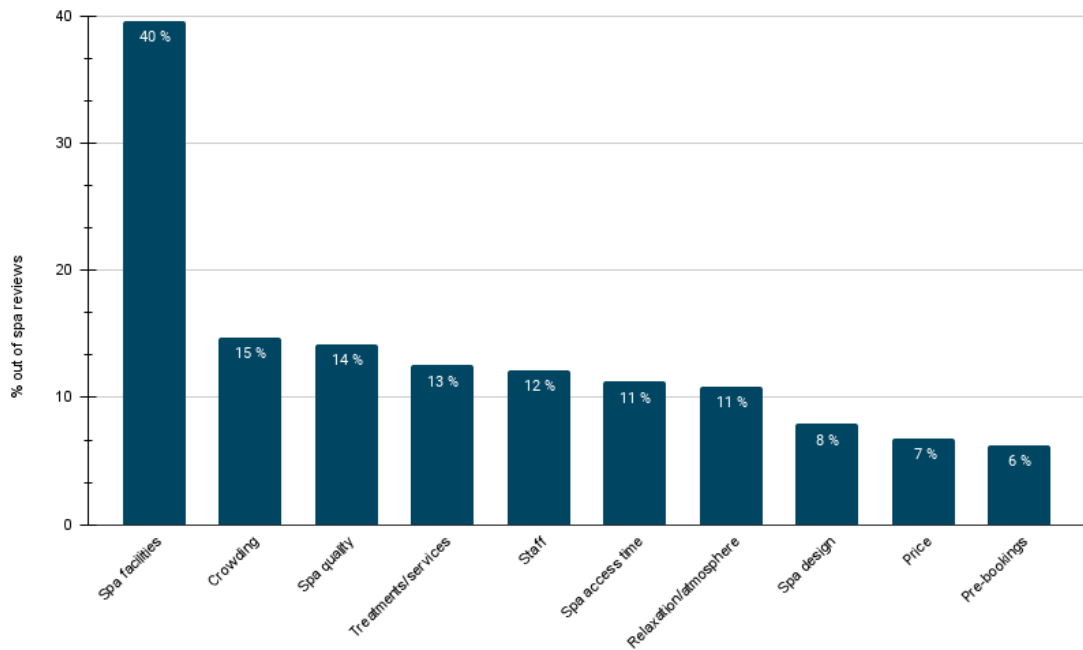


Figure 7. Spa experience elements for luxury spa hotels in Latvia for 2020 (n = 542)

Reviewers also highlighted availability of the gym and options for kids (smaller pools and whirlpools). Another important indicator that impacted the overall spa experience was crowding (15%). Dissatisfaction for long waiting lines to the saunas, overcrowded whirlpools and generally unpleasant atmosphere for expected leisure in spa was expressed by both visitor groups with included spa access and the ones who paid extra for the spa access:

SPA was not really available. My booking includes access to SPA, but access is limited and occurs in a live queue. Administration should have decreased the number of bookings with access to SPA because they can not serve the declared number of SPA visitors. Just a waste of money and time. (Male, individual staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 1)

Some hotels offer the spa access also to non-staying guests and this aspect also influences the overall spa experience:

Well, the queues at the spa are nonsense. Due to the fact that not only hotel guests are allowed in, the hotel guests themselves in bathrobes were forced to sit in the

lobby and wait for someone to come out, because there is a strictly defined number of lockers, and without them they are not allowed. This attitude towards hotel guests is very surprising. (Female, family staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 7)

Booked this hotel so we can enjoy a spa break... when we were there the spa wasn't available and fully booked so it was a big disappointment for a spa break without the spa ... it must be available as priority for people who are staying at the hotel... otherwise it's fully booked and the hotel is losing the value as advertised with the spa and swimming pool facilities. (Female, couple staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 7)

As year 2020 was full of different restrictions, many hotels were forced to decrease the number of visitors and make pre-bookings for the spa area. Crowding was also mentioned in regards with the pre-bookings (6%). Though some visitors highlighted pre-booking as an advantage, most of the reviewers saw the pre-booking as useless. Even when the spa was booked in advance in separate time, it was crowded and it was impossible to follow the safety measures. Spa visitors highlighted that this information should be available already in advance:

I was a little disappointed that we couldn't get any SPA treatment, which was the main goal why we went to you. It was nice that we managed to arrange a sauna visit. At the booking, please warn that spa treatments must be booked several days in advance. We didn't get any treatment.....! (Male, group staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 8)

Another important theme highlighted in reviews is spa quality (14%). Most of the visitors commented on aspects such as water temperature, cleanliness, water chemical compound and smell, as well as the technical maintenance of the facilities (out of order, broken, outdated). Spa managers should consider every touchpoint of the spa such as door handles in saunas or wet floor, so customers could enjoy safe environment at the spa. Spa quality is strongly related to customer expectations and non-availability or issues with the spa facilities might lead customer to disappointing spa experience.

13% of the reviews mentioned treatments and other spa services (sauna rituals, gym, aqua training). Reviewers mostly commented on overall satisfaction, treatment duration,

quality and variety of spa treatments and services available. Detailed comments revealed that during the treatment every smallest detail such as music, scent or lighting matter. High importance was put on spa personnel and treatment specialist's performance. Staff was mentioned frequently (12%) in spa reviews as staff is present during the whole spa journey. For spa guests it is important how they are greeted at the entrance and what attitude they receive during the service or treatment:

I would personally suggest against taking a massage at the SPA as it was not rather relaxing + it was quite physically cold. The masseuse did not ask any questions and the entire massage felt more like a technical exam than a tailored experience (which I would have expected at this price point). (Male, couple staying at 5-star hotel, rated their stay: 8)

Everything was fine except for the spa area. We took a massage and a spa ritual, the master was a little distracted by the phone and chewed a gum. I would also like more friendliness from the reception in the spa area. (Female, family staying at 4-star hotel, rated their stay: 8)

However, some of the spa visitors also mentioned the lack of spa attendant in the spa area, which impacted the overall spa experience:

I wanted more monitoring from the staff towards the rules in the SPA. Small children without diapers, older kids who make unthinkable jumps into the pool, despite the restriction. Heated loungers serve as towel dryers, are occupied and others cannot use them. Used barware is stacked everywhere and is not cleaned in time. Again, the signs are not to make noise, but this rule is also violated. (Female, family staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 9)

Spa access time and duration also was covered in the spa reviews (11%). Most of the visitors mention that limited spa access (1.5 h or 2 h) is not enough to enjoy the facilities. Some also mention that they would prefer to enjoy the spa facilities both in the evening of the check-in, and on the next morning instead of one-time access. 11% of the reviews also mentioned relaxation and atmosphere as the spa experience indicators, however limited spa access and crowding can influence relaxation possibilities:

Swimming pool and saunas were very crowded. Saunas were so crowded that there were even no places to sit. If you are looking for relaxation at the spa zone

on weekends, you have to take into account that it will be crowded with families with children (so no silence, no retreat, if you are staying alone). (Female, individual staying at 4-star hotel, rated the stay: 7)

The results reveal that dissatisfaction caused by crowding is connected also to different motivations of spa goers. While couples want to relax and have a calm spa visit, families with kids want to enjoy the facilities and have fun. While some spa centres have separate “quiet hours” for visitors without kids, most of the spa centres do not limit the visitation times for different customers.

Spa price (7%) was one of the least mentioned elements as many luxury hotels include spa access along with the room bookings. Reviews concerning the spa price described the treatments as too expensive, or highlighted that the variety of spa facilities are not worth the price. Some visitors also commented on the overall design (8%) and planning of the spa, which can give great insights for spa managers for improvement:

Location of lockers in the women's locker room in the SPA area, which are located opposite the hair dryer, because of the very narrow passage. If a lady dries her hair, it is not possible to change clothes due to the narrowness. There is only one contrast shower in the SPA sauna area on the 1st floor, but there is no ordinary shower. To rinse off the sauna after heating up, go to the 2nd floor or changing rooms. (Female, couple staying at 4-star hotel, rated their stay: 9)

More than a half of the reviews (n = 696) described positive (60%) spa experience, but 7% of total reviews mentioned both positive and negative aspects of spa experience. Spa themes mentioned the most in positive reviews were concerning: spa facilities, treatments/services, relaxation/atmosphere and spa quality. Interestingly that even though the spa experience for some guests was negative (33%), guests rated the overall wellness stay quite high (see Figure 8).

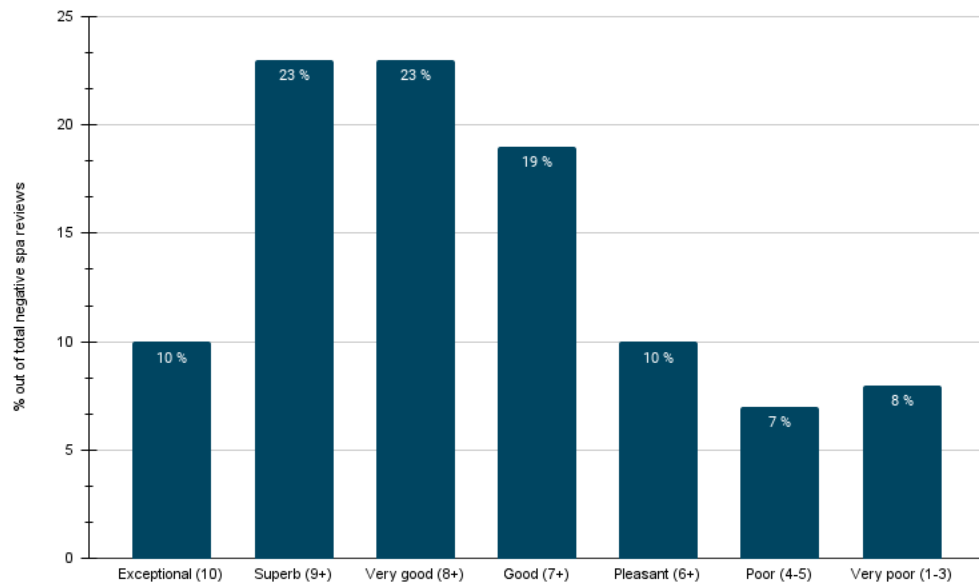


Figure 8. Negative reviews per received Booking.com rating (n = 231)

Spa themes mentioned the most in negative reviews were concerning crowding, spa facilities, spa quality and spa access time. Negative reviews that were rated as very poor (1–3) revealed that customers were dissatisfied with the whole experience. Low ratings were given based on two main issues: expectations versus reality (star rating, price performance, expected services and quality) or poor service attitudes (unfriendly staff, feeling of not being welcome, staff that does not care). This shows that spa experience is important, but not crucial to the overall experience of the stay in the luxury hotel.

Less than a half (11 out of 24) of luxury hotels replied to their guest reviews. All together 41% of the reviews were answered. Most of the replies were very generic. Reviews with the lowest received rating were answered rarely (see Figure 9). While reviews with the higher rating were answered frequently. For example, 31% of total replies were answers to reviews rated with 10, while reviews rated with 1 to 6 received each only 3% of hotel staff responses.

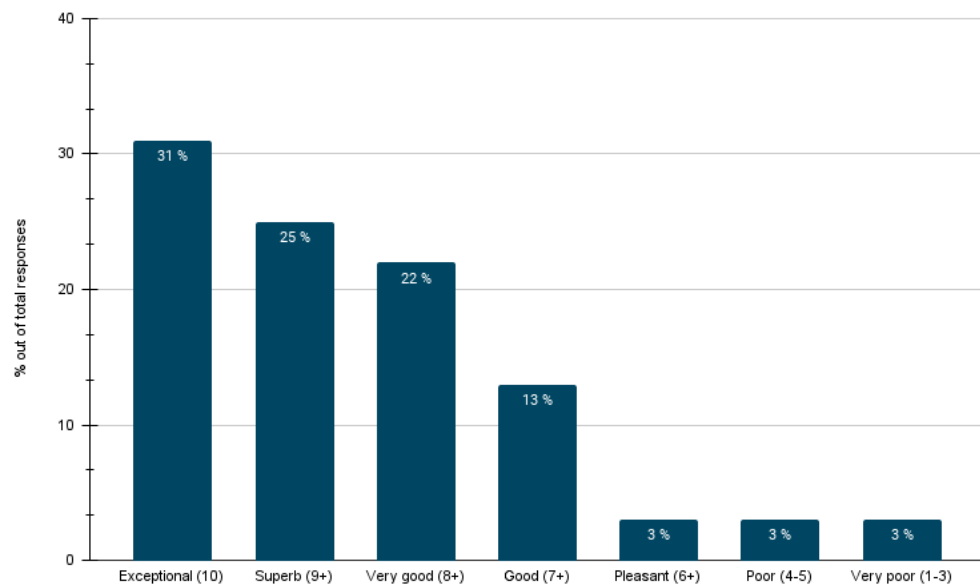


Figure 9. Hotel responses to reviews per received Booking.com rating (n = 288)

This subchapter gave an overview about the results gained from the Booking.com review analysis. The results showed what factors form the customer wellness experiences in Latvian luxury hotels with spa facilities. The next subchapter provides an insight from the expert interviews about memorable spa experience offerings in Latvian luxury hotels and how four realms of the experience influence the overall customer wellness experiences.

2.3.2. Creating memorable Wellness experiences in Latvian Spas

The first question concerned the general motivation of spa visitors. Two experts mentioned that it mainly depends on personal aims, however two main reasons such as physical and emotional aspects were highlighted. Physical aspects can be related to improving the overall health or some specific need (e.g back massage, facial). Emotional aspects are strongly related with whom the spa is visited. When visiting a spa alone, one wants to relax, indulge themselves and spend time for self-realisation – “meditation by being with yourself and understanding what is happening inside you” (Expert 4). When visiting with family or friends, one wants to spend time with their loved ones, celebrate special occasions, experience joy and “healthy entertainment with friends or family” (Expert 3). Expert 4 mentions that for domestic tourists a spa visitation is a great idea for

a gift, but Expert 3 highlights that spa for international tourists is a relaxing place where to recover from travel and unwind. Massage in the evening can provide a proper sleep after a long journey. But above all spa is a way “to escape from daily routine and get positive, memorable experiences” (Expert 1).

Asked about the specific experiences and emotions that people are looking for in spas, all experts agreed that spa is all about positive experiences. While some spa guests seek for the overall relaxation, others might feel the need to be pampered and indulge in treatments. Experts highlighted that feeling of touch are essential elements of the spa experience, and for some guests to feel in the centre of attention is one of the main reasons of visitation (Expert 3). People are looking for different emotions in the spa, and feelings can be very individual (Expert 4). Elements that can influence spa experience positively or negatively are personnel, customer service, products used in treatments, spa facilities (available options and maintenance), crowding (also non-staying guests) and overall atmosphere – everything that reflects to our senses (what customers see, smell, hear, feel and taste). In the spa journey every detail matter, even before the service consumption. Sometimes even the slightest issue can impact the whole experience. When asked about specific elements that impact memorability of the spa experience, the details during the whole journey were mentioned again, as well as personnel and service itself. “I tell my team, if a person leaves with the thought of return, we have already achieved our goal. Our goal is not one visit or treatment, but a lasting positive memory so the person wants to return.” (Expert 3). Expert 2 mentioned unlimited spa visitation time and highlighted that customers like flexible working hours, when they can plan their visits as they wish. But Expert 4 mentioned that crowded spa and loud visitors might impact the positive memories about the spa experience.

The questions about four realms of experience revealed that esthetic and escapist realms prevails among spa visitors in Latvia. Esthetic realm is about being there and enjoying the time. Expert 4 emphasises that a spa visit is freely a customer's choice to be in that exact moment and time, focusing on his own well-being. The entertainment realm is associated more with the spa visits with friends or family, some private events at the spa or spa rituals. The educational realm is present in some spa aspects, such as learning about the spa products, treatments (Expert 1) or gaining information about the spa facilities and

order how a spa should be visited (Expert 2). However, Expert 4 mentions that “spa is relaxation and rest through water. Customers expect that no one will interfere, ask questions or educate them. If they want something educational, they will look for other options and services such as beauty salons or physiotherapists”. Nevertheless, educating their customers is essential for spa therapists as “treatment does not end when the guest goes out through the door, the treatment continues with those recommendations from the therapist” (Expert 3). All experts agreed, that for customers escaping from everyday life and forgetting about daily routines are the main reasons of spa visitation.

When asked about the most popular type of spa services used by spa customers, all experts spotlighted the dry and wet spa areas of the spa. Mainly customers visit spa to enjoy swimming pools and saunas. However, some visitors in 4-star hotel spa also prefer combination of services offered in day spa packages (Expert 1). In regards to treatments, Expert 3 mentions how important personnel is in the decision-making process:

Customers tend to choose more classical massages. There are people who immediately know what they want, but there are people who may not know so much about spa and massage. But when you explain more about other treatments, I have noticed that very often a person changes the classic massage to something else.

Some spas offer spa rituals as part of a spa treatment, however authentic and unique spa rituals are not represented among interviewed spas. At the moment none of the interviewed spas offer additional spa rituals (scrubs, special sauna rituals) available for all spa guests free of charge. 5-star hotel has considered sauna rituals, but due to the lack of spa space and for the convenience of spa guests, at the moment rituals at the spa area are not offered (Expert 3). Also surprise elements are not widespread in spas as it can be very costly for an organisation. However, Expert 1 adds that spa personnel always try to make gestures of attention for special occasions, whether it is “a set of spa products, a glass of wine after the spa experience, a healthy smoothie before the spa visit or the discount voucher on the product or treatment”. Other experts mention that offering bathrobes, slippers and towels for each guest can be the little thing that can create this pleasant surprise moment (Expert 3; Expert 4).

Atmosphere in spas is created using the following sense triggers: music, aromas and special lighting. Dim lights and calm music can create the ambient atmosphere which lead customers to relaxation. Very important are relaxation rooms after treatments, where guest can slowly return back to reality (Expert 3). Guests gladly stay longer in these rooms and can enjoy herbal tea and healthy snacks such as nuts and dried fruits. Nevertheless, comfort adds to the general spa atmosphere and “spa design elements such as heated benches, cosy rooms, comfortable couches, fully equipped treatment rooms, and provided amenities in the changing areas” are vital elements (Expert 1). Another aspect of memorable spa experience is co-creation. All experts indicate that customers are able to adapt some elements of the treatment or massage (pressure, technique, music, choice of the oils). Very important is communication between the therapist and customer, sometimes the therapist must read the clients wishes from their eyes or facial expressions (Expert 4). The 5-star hotel offers personalized spa treatments, where customers can combine their favourite 30 min procedures in 1 h or 1.5 h long spa experience. But the 4-star hotel chain spa strategic manager admits that:

We have tried to give a person several options to combine the treatment, but practice and experience shows that people prefer to choose a ready-made offer. Which means that people do not want to think. They come to the spa and think in their mind – surprise me!

To reminisce the spa experience, in all six spa centres spa customers are able to purchase spa cosmetics used in the treatments. Additionally, some spas offer swimsuits for extra charge. One 4-star hotel spa also offers “candles and aroma diffusers” (Expert 1). Nevertheless, other special or authentic spa souvenirs are not available.

The next subchapter summarizes all three parts of the empirical research through the theoretical aspects mentioned in the literature overview, as well as discusses the prospects of creating memorable experiences in Latvian spas.

2.4. Discussion and recommendations

Theoretical overview discussed the importance of customers in service industry and highlighted that with the changing economy, new and more subjective ways to explore customer satisfaction should be adapted (Williams, 2006, p. 485). In the experience

economy instead of exploring general customer satisfaction, managers should focus on individual experiences (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 19; Schmitt, 2003, p. 46; Lo et al., 2015, p. 158), because they reveal specific elements and stimuli that impact the customer experience (Schmitt, 2011, p. 64). The analysis of Booking.com reviews revealed individual luxury hotel guest experiences and specific elements that impact overall hotel stay (e.g. food, staff, room facilities, location) and spa experiences (e.g. facilities, crowding, spa quality, treatments, staff).

In accordance with the theory these specifics can help managers to create experiences as a holistic journey (Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 13; Lin & Mattila, 2018, p. 48; Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 102), taking into account all the touchpoints and triggers that can either benefit or ruin the whole experience (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 103; Wallace & Smith, 2020, p. 231). Booking.com reviews show that customers pay attention to every service detail. Sometimes even the smallest issue can lead to a negative experience, or on the contrary create the whole visit very memorable. All interviewed spa experts stressed the importance of the details in order to create not only a positive experience, but also memorable one, which would lead customers to re-visit. Interviews revealed that spa experts are aware of the details that can enhance or impact the customer satisfaction during the whole experience. Nevertheless, spa managers should use Booking.com reviews to explore individual and specific customer experiences, because they reveal what customers actually want (Pine II & Gilmore, 2000, p. 19).

According to service quality studies (Choi et al., 2015, Albayrak et al., 2017; Nunkoo et al., 2020), netnographic research highlighted the importance of tangible elements of the hotels – facilities, infrastructure, maintenance and design. In addition, the spa quality aspects such as cleanliness, water temperature and facility maintenance are crucial aspects that can impact the overall spa experience. In regards to overall hotel stay experience, food was the most commented theme in the reviews. While in recent study (Nunkoo et al., 2020, p. 6) food did not positively influence customer satisfaction, this study showed that Latvian luxury hotel guests are more demanding in terms of food quality. Cai and Alaedini (2018, p. 201) emphasise that both intangible and tangible factors are important in luxury hotels and can benefit strategic decision making. The empirical study showed

that intangible elements such as view and location of the hotel, crowding and staff are often mentioned in the customer reviews.

Employees and service attitude plays a major role in customer experiences, it was the second most covered element in the Booking.com reviews. Studies done in the service quality field shows that employees are vital service elements (Lo et al., 2015, p. 162), especially in an experience economy where employees with experiential intelligence are of utmost importance (Chen et al., 2019, p. 1424). The netnographic research results stresses the importance of employees, who not only serve the customers, but are helpful, show interest in understanding the customer needs and go above and beyond to create an excellent experience. Connection with the customers on a more personal and emotional level requests highly trained and skilled personnel. Managers could face the challenges with hiring the personnel who would have the skills needed to perform the service beyond just the interaction with the guests.

The diversity and availability of spa facilities was the most discussed theme in the spa reviews, which shows that the number of saunas, steam rooms, pool and relaxation areas are elements of great importance for Latvian customers. Spa managers in research done in China highlighted that diversity of wellness facilities are essential in marketing the spa experiences (Lo et al., 2013, p. 441). However, empirical research raised the question of how the spa establishments are promoting their facilities. Many accommodations in Latvia promote their wellness offerings as spas, but in reality, the hotel might have only one sauna or pool. This reflects the problem highlighted by Grénman & Rääkkönen (2015). If the wellness concepts, for example spas, are wrongly marketed – it can lead to customer dissatisfaction as received services in reality does not correspond with the expected (Grénman & Rääkkönen, 2015, p. 10). This was stressed also by the luxury hotel guests where many reviews expressed their disappointment with the very limited spa facilities. Additionally, all four spa experts in interviews highlighted the importance of wet and dry areas of the spa, as these facilities are the most visited wellness services in their represented spas. This concludes that accommodation managers should pay closer attention to how they are promoting and labelling their services on different booking platforms such as Booking.com.

Choi et al. (2015, p. 275) emphasise that wellness value plays a significant role in spa experiences and involve more intangible elements (enjoyment, emotions, attitude from staff, overall satisfaction) than functional value. However, the issues with overcrowding from the Booking.com reviews shows that customers cannot fully enjoy the spa experience and expected relaxation if the spa is full. The issues of crowding pose a challenge for managers to find the right balance between the economic benefit for business and customer satisfaction. Bigger hotels and especially luxury hotels have high operational and maintenance costs, so evidently every manager is happy with the increased customer flow. But at what cost? Almost a tenth of all reviews suggest that spa access time should be prolonged. This would allow guests to visit the spa more than once, and expand the available spa time slot for all guests. Otherwise, the customer who aims to enjoy a spa break but receives only 1.5 h at the spa, can end up disappointed because the initial goal was not reached. Increasing the spa access duration can affect customers' sense of gained economic value (Lin & Mattila, 2018, p. 48).

The overview of the Latvian wellness industry shows that most spas in Latvia are located in 4-star hotels. Almost half of all total Booking.com reviews in 2021 were left for three biggest spa hotels in Latvia. This shows that the spa network in Latvia is limited and most visitors tend to choose the most popular spa hotels for their holidays. It should be noted that these spa hotels are also open to non-staying guests, which significantly increases the visitor numbers during the weekends or national holidays. From reviews it is seen that planned relaxation was ruined by the overcrowded spas, also due to the non-staying guests. It is evident that there is an issue with the supply and demand among the top spa hotels and resorts. It should be defined who exactly is their main customer segment and probably top spa hotels should consider separate hours for in-house and non-staying guests. The same concerns the spa access time for different customer segments (e.g. couples, families with kids). The netnographic research revealed that dissatisfaction caused by crowding is connected also to different motivations of spa goers

Another aspect worth mentioning is the privacy and discreteness when replying to customer reviews. The Booking.com review analysis revealed that some hotels use the customers full name when replying to the comment, though the review itself displays only the reviewers first name. Sometimes customers are willing to share their feedback only

when they know that their feedback is anonymous. If the hotel cannot guarantee the anonymity of the reviewer, customers may not share their feedback next time (Sangpikul, 2019, p. 524). Hotel staff should handle the reviews and replies carefully and with the respect to customers' privacy.

Theoretical literature overview (Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Bharwani & Mathews, 2016; Ferrari et al., 2014; Grénman & Rääkkönen, 2017; Lin & Mattila, 2018; p. Pine II & Gilmore, 1998) suggested that sensory experiences, spa rituals, co-creation, surprise elements and different memory points can benefit the experience to become memorable. The results from semi-structured interviews with spa experts suggest that spas use different sensory elements that trigger all senses during the spa visit. Also, some elements of the spa treatment can be personalized and customers can become active co-creators of his/her experience. Additionally, spas sell different memory points e.g., spa cosmetics used in the treatments or aroma oils, that can help to reminisce the spa experience. Nevertheless, authentic spa rituals that help customers to immerse in the experience (Ferrari et al., 2014, p. 8) and moments of surprise that allow to encounter something unexpected (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1377; Sipe & Testa, 2018, p. 181), are not quite developed in the interviewed spas. Authentic treatments not only expand the experiential service offerings, but also help to stand out from the competitors (Lin & Mattila, 2018, p. 49).

The experience economy and 4E model defines that memorable experiences are the ones, which combine all four realms. However, interviews with the spa experts revealed that for customers in spas esthetic and escapism realms are the most important ones. The entertainment realm is not associated with the Latvian understanding of spa experiences. The luxury hotel spa guests mainly want to escape daily lives and immerse themselves in relaxation, rather than have fun and entertain themselves. Nevertheless, the educational realm can be present in the spa experience prior to visitation when the staff interacts with the customers (Lo et al., 2013, p. 444), as well as during the spa visit or treatment, where customers gain additional knowledge about the experience. Few reviewers expressed the feeling of being lost when entering the spa, so educating the customers about the spa options or suggested order of spa facilities must be considered. Bühring (2015, p. 295) also notes that level of participation might differ from the initial 4E model based on the

nature of experience. Taking into account spa specifics, escapism in a spa can also be defined as active immersion in relaxation.

Summarizing the overview of the Latvian wellness industry, it should be noted that Latvia has several strengths in the health and spa sector (see Table 11). However, there is a big gap between the therapeutic and spa sector.

Table 11. Latvian wellness industry challenges and opportunities

Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natural resources (peat, water, mud, herbs) Unique traditions (sauna rituals) Suitable nature and climate (sea, fresh air, forests, bogs) Long history and knowledge of spa traditions High quality services and experienced professionals Wide range of accommodations (hotels, manors, health resorts) Nearby tourist attractions near spa locations Proximity to the big cities Healthy and traditional local cuisine Competitive pricing
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public image of the resorts (especially sanatoriums) Maintenance and facilities (especially health resorts) Promotion of authentic practices for domestic tourists Funding opportunities (especially health resorts) Expansion of customer segments Marketing and provided information (e.g. websites)

This gap is mainly due to the fact that sanatoriums in most cases are government funded institutions, while spa hotels are privately owned or belong to international hotel chains. Unique health practices (e.g. different baths) along with the natural resources (mud, mineral water, sulphur) are very important marketing labels for international tourists. However, these practices are more used in sanatoriums and rehabilitation centres as medical services rather than in spa hotels. Some health resorts have maintenance and infrastructure issues, which create an unappealing public image for domestic tourists (especially younger generations). Also, younger generations like to try out new and unexplored treatments rather than traditional practices (Lo et al., 2013, p. 441). On the other hand, spa hotels have modern facilities and infrastructure, a wide variety of treatments, but use local natural resources and authentic practices less than health resorts. Netnographic research results showed that crowding is a relevant issue for luxury spa hotels. Whether a customer chooses a therapeutic or spa sector, well-being is the main

reason for the visitation. So, both sectors can provide benefits for customers health and wellbeing by adding a wellness component to the existing spa facilities for medical tourism” (Choi et al., 2015, p. 265). Rehabilitation centers should consider paying wellness customers as a new customer segment and create innovative wellness offerings. This would expand the wellness offerings in Latvia and keep the historical wellness and therapeutic traditions alive.

Although this research provided insights into the Latvian wellness industry and shed light on specific elements that impact the luxury spa experience, some limitations need to be considered. First, this research explored spa experiences through the lens of domestic tourists through the time period of one year. Domestic tourists are important because local tourism helps to develop new products, money stays in the country, and domestic tourists are ready to participate in tourism activities throughout the whole year. However, international tourists are also part of Latvian wellness tourism. Different visitor groups might have different expectations, as well as different elements that impact the overall spa experience. Additionally, customer expectations might differ also because 2020 was an exceptional year also for spa customers. Further research should be conducted to explore also international tourist spa experiences, so underlying spa experience elements for Latvian wellness industry could be defined. Second, in the experience research emphasis should be put on the whole customer journey before, during and after (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Heinonen et al., 2010). So, it would be relevant to explore the elements that form the decision of the customer to choose a particular spa hotel. As well as explore the after-effects of the experience over a longer time period. Although many studies have highlighted the importance of emotions and memory in experience creation, still more research should be done to explore more deeper underlying elements of memory formation (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1368). Pine II and Gilmore define the last stage of the progression of economic value as guiding to transformation. Dillette (2016, p. 123) notes that “transformative experiences in hospitality and tourism are extremely complex and multidimensional in nature”. However, it would be valuable to explore whether Latvian spas have prospects of reaching the highest stage of economic progression - transformation? As well as explore what is the meaning and definition of transformative experiences for Latvian spa goers and managers.

CONCLUSIONS

This master's thesis explored the prospects of creating memorable experiences in Latvian spas. The theoretical overview discussed the importance of experiences in the current economy and changing customer behaviour. Customers seek unique and authentic experiences rather than just a product or service. The whole consumption process becomes an experience, in which every little detail matters. The literature overview presented different experience frameworks proposed by Pine II and Gilmore (1998), Schmitt (1999) and Aho (2001). The role of the 4E theoretical model was evaluated in regards to memorable wellness experience creation.

Content analysis of secondary online data from government institutions and organisations was used to create an overview of Latvian wellness industry. Based on the offered services, Latvian wellness industry can be divided into two sectors: the therapeutic and spa sector. The therapeutic sector such as sanatoriums and rehabilitation centers provide health improving services, using historical traditions and nature based elements such as water, mud and air. Although the therapeutic sector mainly hosts government funded program patients or medical tourists, it has a potential to develop new wellness offerings also for paying customers. Nowadays, Latvian spas offer wellness services such as saunas, swimming pools, beauty treatments and authentic local experiences. The gathered data shows that spa facilities in Latvia are mostly located within the 4-star hotels, however many uncategorized facilities such as guest houses, lodges or manor houses offer some type of wellness services. Development of government funded public swimming pools in recent years has benefited the wellness service availability in rural areas.

Empirical data were collected through netnographic research and semi-structured interviews with luxury spa representatives. Netnographic research analysed Booking.com reviews left by Latvian customers in English, Latvian, and Russian languages for 4-star and 5-star hotel spas during the year of 2020. The results revealed nine elements that

impact the overall hotel stay, and ten elements that impact spa experiences. Guests staying at the luxury hotel rated food, hotel staff, room facilities and hotel location as the most important elements that impacted their overall hotel experience. Whereas spa facilities, treatments, spa quality and overall atmosphere were enhancing the spa experience. The content and details of analysed reviews showed that Latvian customers associate spa with saunas and pool areas, and are demanding in terms of variety of spa facilities. The results from the reviews highlight elements of the offered wellness services that need to be improved in Latvian luxury spas to enhance customer spa experiences. Crowding, spa facilities, spa quality and spa access time were the top elements that negatively affected the spa experience.

In order to improve the spa experiences, managers should:

- Analyse their customer segments, considering different customer expectations from spa visit.
- Limit the non-staying guest visits during the national holidays or high season.
- Extend the spa duration by increasing the spa access time per visit.
- Market the spa facilities and available services correctly, making the information about availability, prices and limitations already before the visit.

Semi-structured interviews with four spa experts revealed that spas know what are the motivation of their spa visitors and what kind of feelings are they looking for in spas. Experts noted that in wellness experiences customer service, spa facilities, products and overall atmosphere can create positive experience. To create memorable spa experiences interviewed spas use sensory elements, especially lights, music and special spa cosmetic, tailored treatments according to customer wishes and needs and relaxing atmosphere before and after the treatment. In order to create a memorable visit, a luxury setting and service should correspond to the feeling of escape, where every smallest detail of the whole spa experience is thought through.

In order to design memorable spa experiences, managers should:

- Use authentic Latvian wellness practices (sauna, whisks, cold water immersions) and natural resources (mud, natural scrubs, flowers and herbs) to create new and unique spa rituals.

- Consider micro spa rituals also for wet and dry area visitors (special aromas, body scrubs, sauna rituals).
- Stage the unexpected for their guests with small moments of surprise, taking into account also pre and after consumption experience.
- Consider personalized customer service for a longer time period, not limiting the experience to one-time visit.

This research provides a thorough examination of prospects of creating memorable experiences in Latvian spas. It clarifies what are individual experiences of Latvian spa customers and reveal relationships between customer satisfaction and different hotel service elements. The results from Booking.com reviews may assist spa establishments in better understanding customer expectations from 4-star and 5-star hotels. In general, Latvian customers rate their experiences in luxury hotel spas as positive, and the average given rating to luxury properties was 8.5.

Experience economy is an interesting theoretical framework that should be researched, modified and applied also to the wellness industry, in particular to spa establishments. Using netnography, businesses can extract useful information regarding individual customer experiences. Moreover, the results obtained from the netnographic research can be useful to spas operating not only in the luxury hotel segment. This research does not ignore the relevance of different service quality measurements and tools. Instead it reveals the usefulness and usability of online reviews generated by customers as an addition to current methods. Online reviews can provide day to day feedback regarding guest experiences. These reviews address real-time issues and highlight areas of improvements, and can significantly decrease the reaction time to recurring complaints and issues. The positive reviews could be used for mutual feedback between customer and staff as an appraisal for the service they provide.

Studies done before in the field focus on wellness tourism experiences leaving the spa industry and especially domestic tourists unexplored. The significance of this research is that spa experiences were researched using online reviews on Booking.com, while all previous studies used Tripadvisor. This is the first-time study done in Latvia focusing on domestic tourist spa experiences. Moreover, the results contribute not only to spa

managers, but also to hotel managers, especially operating in the luxury segment. In the future similar research could be undertaken to examine also the wellness experiences of international tourists. Latvian wellness industry has something to offer to both domestic and international tourists – either it is a health improvement, disease prevention, beauty treatments or everyday pampering. Spas that offer a wide variety of well-maintained spa facilities with limited number of visitors and high-quality spa treatments served by experientially intelligent employees can create memorable wellness experiences for their customers, and maybe even evoke the sixth sense.

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Appendix 1. Interpretive codes regarding overall hotel experiences

Interpretive code	Definition of interpretive code	Total mentions
Food	Reviews addressing F&B services and quality	500
Staff	Reviews addressing employees at the front office, F&B, spa and housekeeping	304
Room facilities	Reviews addressing in-room options, interior and atmosphere	299
Location	Reviews addressing the hotel location and surroundings	214
Hotel facilities	Reviews addressing the hotel grounds, interior, atmosphere and crowding	186
Cleanliness	Reviews addressing the maintenance of the facilities (incl. smells)	158
View	Reviews addressing the view from both room and hotel premises	147
Star rating/price performance	Reviews addressing the expectations versus hotel performance based on the star rating and value for money	69
COVID	Reviews addressing the restrictions, safety measures and pandemic	65
Total mentions (n = 696)		1942

Appendix 2. Interpretive codes regarding spa experiences

Interpretive code	Definition of interpretive code	Total mentions
Spa facilities	Reviews addressing options available at wet and dry areas of the spa	215
Crowding	Reviews addressing lines at the spa and to many visitors	80
Spa quality	Reviews addressing the maintenance of the facilities (incl. smells), also water quality (chlorine, temperature)	77
Treatments/services	Reviews addressing spa treatments and other services (sauna rituals, gym, aqua aerobics)	68
Staff	Reviews addressing employees at the spa (reception, bar), spa therapists and pool attendees	66
Spa access time	Reviews addressing the spa visitation frequency, duration and time during the stay at the hotel.	61
Relaxation/atmosphere	Reviews addressing the overall relaxing atmosphere	59
Spa design	Reviews addressing overall design, interior and spa layout	43
Price	Reviews addressing the spa and treatment price, also value for money	37
Pre-bookings	Reviews addressing the advantages and issues of spa and treatment pre-bookings	34
Total mentions (n = 542)		740

Appendix 3. Semi-structured interview questions for spa experts

Motivation	Why do you think people visit spas?	(Bodnar, 2019, p. 172)
Service experience	What kind of experience and emotions people are looking for in a spa?	(Bodnar, 2019, p. 172; Lo et al. 2013, p. 450)
	What are the factors which can influence customer spa experience (positively and negatively)?	(Bodnar, 2019, p. 172; Lo et al. 2013, p. 450)
Realms of 4E model	How important for guests during the spa visit is to ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - be entertained? (<i>entertainment realm</i>) - be educated? (<i>educational realm</i>) - just be there and enjoy the facilities (<i>esthetic realm</i>) - escape from daily life and forgetting time (<i>escapist realm</i>) 	(Bodnar, 2019, p. 172; Rijal & Ghimire, 2016, p. 48)
	What are the most popular types of spa services or products used by your spa customers?	(Lo et al. 2013, p. 450)
Memorability	What do you think defines the most memorable experience during a spa visit?	(Bodnar, 2019, p. 172)
	Does your spa offer some spa rituals? What kind of sensory elements are used in your spa (e.g., music, aromas, special snacks, lights)? Does your spa offer some surprises/things that customers did not expect before the arrival? Does your spa offer or sell some memory points? (e.g., cosmetic, towels, souvenirs) Is there any possibility for customers to be involved in experience creation? (modify treatment, choose the aroma oil, music etc.)	

RESÜMEE

MEELDEJÄÄVAD HEAOLUKOGEMUSED LÄTI SPAADES

Žanete Žeibe – Dakstiņa

Heaolutööstus on näide kogemusmajandusest. Heaolu hõlmab nii praktilist kasu kui ka naudinguid ning seda seostatakse sageli elamuste, luksuse ja viietärnihotellidega. Kliendid ei soovi üksnes toodet ega teenust, vaid ehtsaid ja ainukordseid elamusi. Kogu tarbimisprotsessist saab kogemus, milles iga pisiasi on tähtis. Sellest hoolimata on heaolutööstusest saadavaid kogemusi vähe uuritud. Uurimisprobleem: heaolusektor laieneb kiiresti ja enamik heaoluasutusi paneb rõhku teenuste kvaliteedile. Kuidas võiksid spaakeskused kasutada klientide veebitagasisidet heaolukogemuste kohta, et kujundada need neile meeldivaks.

Magistritöö eesmärk on analüüsida Läti spaade väljavaateid pakkuda meeldejäävaid kogemusi: vaadelda lähemalt praegu osutatavaid heaoluteenuseid, uurida klientide veebitagasisidet nende heaolukogemuste kohta ning anda spaajuhtidele soovitusi, kuidas pakutavaid teenuseid parandada.

Töö uurimisküsimused on järgmised:

- Milliseid pakutavate heaoluteenuste elemente tuleb Läti luksusspaades parandada, et suurendada klientide heaolukogemusi?
- Mis tüüpi meeldejäävate kogemuste tegureid spaad arvesse võtavad, kui nad loovad klientidele heaolukogemusi?

Et Läti heaoluvaldkonda paremini mõista, antakse ülevaade praegu pakutavatest heaoluteenustest. Empiirilises osas vaadeldakse, millist tagasisidet on kliendid andnud 2020. aastal lehekülje Booking.com kaudu luksusspaadele, ja vestlusi luksusspaahotellide

esindajatega. Selles osas kasutatakse kvalitatiivseid uurimismeetodeid – netnograafiat ja sisuanalüüsi.

Teooriatausta käsitlemisel keskendutakse kliendirahulolule kogemusmajanduse vaatenurgast, mille on esitanud Pine ja Gilmore (1998), ning selle praktilistele kasuteguritele, uurides nihet teenusekvaliteedilt teenusekogemusele. Esimeses peatükis vaadeldakse eri kogemusraamistikke, täpsemalt Pine'i ja Gilmore'i (1998) *nelja kogemuse valdkonna* mudelit, ning tutvustatakse meeldejäáva heaolukogemuse loomise mõistet.

Selles uurimuses näidatakse, millised on Läti luksusspaade klientide ootused ja isiklikud kogemused, ning selgitatakse, millised hotelliteeninduse elemendid mõjutavad klientide rahulolu. Tulemustest selgus üheksa elementi, mis mõjutavad kogu hotellikülastust, ja kümme elementi, mis mõjutavad spaakogemust. Luksushotelli külalised nimetasid kõige tähtsamate hotellikogemust mõjutavate teguritena toitu, personali, toateenuseid ja hotelli asukohta. Spaakogemust mõjutasid enim teenused, rahvastatus ja kvaliteet. Läti kliendid on spaateenuste mitmekesisuse suhtes nõudlikud. Tulemuste alusel saab tuua esile valdkonnad, mille arendamine spaakogemust parandab – rahvastatus ja spaa lahtioleku aeg. Üldiselt hindavad Läti kliendid oma luksusspaahotellide kogemusi positiivselt, keskmise hindega 8,5.

Booking.com-i arvustustest saadud tulemused võivad aidata spaaettevõtetel paremini mõista, mida ootavad kliendid nelja- ja viietärnihotellidelt. Need tulemused näitavad, et kõige tähtsam on täita kliendi põhivajadused, kui soovitakse edendada majanduskasvu ja pakkuda meeldejäávaid kogemusi. Uurimuse tulemuste alusel saavad spaajuhid kujundada klientidele meeldejäávaid heaolukogemusi.

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