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The attractiveness of Spa destinations



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Abstract

This research examines the tourists' interests, preferences and perceptions regarding the choice of spa destination. Even though the literature provides knowledge of tourists' motivation in relation to spa, there was acknowledged a gap of knowledge about the process of selection of spa destinations and the additional attributes that the tourists look for while making their choice. Therefore, the aim of this thesis will be to understand based on what additional attributes and activities the tourists choose one spa destination.

The approach of this thesis is deduction, the methods used are qualitative and the study is based on social constructivist ontology with interpretive nature. The theoretical frameworks utilized include destination attractiveness, theory about spa destinations, literature about the spa tourists' habits and motivations, tourists' preferences and perceptions, combined with the theory of push and pull factors.

The data for this thesis was acquired through a combination of semi-structured interviews with 14 respondents at age between 30 and 50 years old, who were staying at the destination chosen for this research as well as extensive participant observation. The data was further processed, coded and distinguished in themes in order to reveal the findings of the thesis.

The results identified that the respondents are interested in the additional attributes and activities that the destination provides, rather than spa facilities only. Their main interests are regarding historical attractions, different sports and facilities, natural heritage and sightseeing. Those findings show that the selection of spa destination depends on the additional attractions and attributes, rather than the spa facilities.

Additional research is needed to investigate the preferences and interests of different age group of tourists, as they might be different to the once analyzed in this thesis.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays within tourism, wellness and SPA are relatively new trend that has registered an impressive growth rate. World-wide more and more people are traveling to destinations that provide wellness facilities (Koncul, 2012). World travelers have made 691 million wellness trips in 2015, which is with 104.4 million more than in 2013. The global spa market has grown from \$94 billion in 2013, up to \$98.6 billion in 2015 (Global Wellness Institute, 2018: online).

The demand for healthy food and healthy lifestyle has increased in the last five years, due to the fast-paced modern live and stressful environments (Koncul, 2012). The spa market has turned into the fastest growing leisure sector which provides facilities as venues to improve person's health and well-being. In fact, using spa and wellness, people has found refuge in ways of relaxation of soul, body and mind (Harmsworth, 2004).

In Europe spa tourism has been developing in conjunction with the overall social development, with 203 million of wellness travelers Europe is a leader among the regions in this industry, and takes the second position, while the top is for USA (Ellis, 2013). Previously almost all tourists have been seniors with lower incomes, while currently spa tourists are typically 30-40 years old with higher income, in addition also tourists from 20 to 25 years old are increasingly interested in this type of tourism (Radnic, 2009). Smith and Kelly (2006) stated that the wellness tourists are healthy people which primary aim of their trip is to preserve their health. Radnic (2009) summarize the spa trend as a modern, complete, and complex health and recreation tourism.

Since the concept of wellness is of a relatively recent origin, the subject is not loaded with substantial scientific literature. A few books, reports and surveys are available by authors who have studied the new trend of tourism and have established research on the tourists' motivations for SPA and wellness (Smith & Puczkó, 2013; Meyers, Sweeney and Witmer, 2005; Kirigs, 2013; Voigt and Pforr, 2014). The insights into spa tourism were mainly provided through research into related domains such as wellness and spa tourist motivations, profiles of wellness and spa tourists, segmentation and management of market demand and supply.

However, the classification of spa tourists is limited in terms of who they are and what motives and factors are behind their visit. Previous research into spa tourists has focused on their

classification with regards to why they visit spas (Mak and Wong, 2007; Azman and Chan, 2016; Kucukusta and Guillet, 2014). It has largely concerned the behaviors; attitudes and needs of people which make them decide to take a holiday or short break at spa (Tawil, 2011). However, the scholars have not been exploring the way the spa tourists are choosing a spa destination based on its attributes and attractiveness. Due to that the literature is missing more comprehensive explanatory frameworks to assess the attractiveness of spa destinations, rather than spa facilities.

In order to address this gap, this thesis will attempt to broaden the depth of knowledge in the field of spa tourism by establishing a classification of spa tourists, it will be based on why people decide to visit a specific spa destination and the factors which affect their choice, considering the literature there is a gap of knowledge about the tourists' motivations to choose a specific spa destination based on its additional attributes and resources rather than spa facilities only. So – despite the growing body of literature, nobody has conceptualized the attractiveness of spa destinations at large.

Leisure travelers want more than just a place to stay. They want to dine out, visit local attractions, and attend events. The spa and wellness might be the primary aim for the trip, however the attributes that a destination provides might represent the underlying factors of tourists' motivation to choose a specific spa destination. Therefore, questions that arise in the research of this topic are: *What attracts tourists to a spa destination? How important are complementary services and experiences offered beyond spa facilities?*

Many researchers (Lynch, 2002; Harmsworth, 2004; Jenner and Smith, 2000) agree that there are various factors influencing the consumer's choice of one spa destination over another, such as consumer's availability of time, financial circumstances, perceived value of services at a spa (service quality), the destination attractions, age, and the image of particular spas.

Yet, according to many others (Messerli and Oyama, 2004; Baloglu and Mangalolu, 2001; Konecnik, 2002), even though the choice of a spa destination might be linked to those factors, a research beyond this is limited and still must be explored in order to fully understand the process of choice. Therefore, a thorough research about the tourists' preferences and perceptions of a spa destination needs to be established, as well as investigation of the way how the additional attributes and types of tourism that the destination provides may influence the tourists' choice.

Consequently, the current study aims to determine the nature and significance of spa-related tourism, and the characteristics and requirements of spa tourists in relation to the destination facility choice process.

The research will be useful because it will provide with information that has not been researched so far which aim is to fill a knowledge gap, and further strives to create value that might help a specific destination to develop itself by knowing the tourists' needs. In this sense, according to Azman and Chan (2016), by understanding the tourist preferences, the tourist's providers will better cater the needs of their customers and will develop their product according to the demand.

1.1. Research question

The aim of this paper will be to establish a research about how and why the tourists choose a specific spa destination. The paper will try to investigate the inner motivations and factors that influence the tourist decision, looking from a different perspective and not focusing directly on the spa facilities but rather focusing at the destination itself and its attributes.

Thereafter the concrete aim of this research study is to answer the following question:

What influences tourists' choice of a SPA destination?

The objectives that arise in this paper and will guide the direction of the project are stated under the following questions which will try to underline and investigate the preferences and perceptions of the tourists:

- How the tourists choose a specific spa destination?
- What attributes and activities a spa destination need to possess in order to be attractive to the tourists?

A specific spa destination is chosen for the research, as the author has the access to conduct interviews with the visitors in different hotels and attractions within the resort. In the same vein, it was considered important to explore tourists' preference and perception of a specific destination

as to further explore and understand how they have chosen this destination and the factors that have attracted them.

2. Introduction to the destination

The destination chosen for a study case is Hisarya. The town is situated in Bulgaria, the country is well ahead of countries (Strategy for sustainable tourism development in Bulgaria 2014-2030, 2014) with proven tradition in balneology in terms of existing, developed and registered (certified) mineral water resources. Every known type of natural mineral water has its representative in Bulgaria. The country has long-standing tradition in balneology and spa tourism and its potential in that field has been recognized since the antiquity, from the time of the Thracians and throughout the Roman Empire. In Roman times (I-VII century) Bulgaria was virtually strewn with baths and balneotherapy sanatoria: Augusta (today Hisarya), (Thermopolis) Bourgas Mineral Baths, Tanzos (Sliven Baths Serdica) Sofia.¹

Bulgaria ranks second place in Europe after Iceland with the wide capacity of mineral springs, providing all type of mineral water. There are found more than 600 natural mineral springs, from all the 1 600 springs in the country. The development of the tourist product for Spa and wellness tourism in Bulgaria ranks fourth place with 6.6 % in the total tourists' supply, after the sea tourism, winter tourism and culture tourism.

The international tourists visiting the country for utilizing spa and wellness service are from Balkan countries 38%, 23 % West Europe and 22% from East Europe. In fact, 2/3 from the tourists visiting spa resorts in Bulgaria have been there before, the aim of their trip is anti-stress and they say that they are attracted by the low prices for those services (Ibid.).

According to the research made by Strategy for sustainable tourism development in Bulgaria 2014-2030 (2014), the basic advantages of Bulgaria as a spa and wellness destination compared to other

¹ <https://trakiaworld.com/c/Hisarya/KURORTNIYaT-HISARYa-NASTOYaShtE-I-BADEShtE->

destinations are: the climate and the health and medical procedures 22%, low prices 20%, the service 19,7%, Spa centers 19%, beautiful nature and clean air 13%. Those figures are based on the tourists' opinions who have been utilizing the spa and wellness services in Bulgaria. The figures represent the most important factors influencing the tourists' decision and reasons behind their visit to Bulgaria.

Hisarya represents one of the mountain and forest wellness destinations in the country. The town is famous with its 22 mineral water springs, from which 16 are natural. In fact, the small town which is situated only 40km away from Plovdiv (second biggest town in Bulgaria) is famous also with its ancient roman history, which makes it very popular with the left Roman ruins surrounding the town.

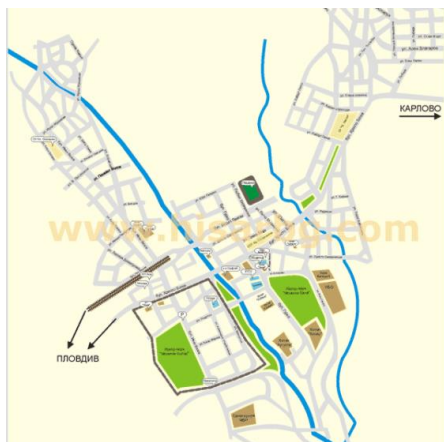
Picture 1. Camels gate



Picture 2. Fortification wall



The fortification wall is 2327 m long and up to 11 m high in certain sections. The southern gate also known as the Camels stands 13 m tall. The urban architecture of the ancient town is mainly situated in Hisarya's Momina salza Park (Maiden's Tear Park).



Map of Hisarya and the ancient town. Source: <http://www.hisarb.com>

The variety of mineral waters are used for the treatment of kidney and urologic diseases, gallbladder diseases, gastrointestinal diseases, as well as musculoskeletal diseases. Their healing effects can be achieved by drinking the water as well as through aqua procedures for the prevention and rehabilitation of diseases in combination with physiotherapy and diets. The temperature of the mineral water in Hisarya might be from 31 °C up to 51 °C, the water itself has no color or odor.

2.1. Tourism in Hisarya

The types of tourism in Hisarya can be distinguished in the following sectors: Vacation – Spa and wellness, culture tourism, congress tourism, ecological tourism, balneological and health tourism, sport tourism, village tourism, religion tourism, and hunting tourism. (Plan for sustainable development of the municipality of Hisarya in the period of 2014-2030, 2014).

In the 80s the town has been visited mostly by Russian tourists, however since Bulgaria has become a member of the European Union and NATO in 2007, the number of international tourists increased, and most of the international tourists visiting the destination are from Israel, Russia, Germany, Italy, France, Romania, England etc. (Plan for sustainable development of the municipality of Hisarya in the period of 2014-2030, 2014).

The number of international tourists has increased twice² in 2015, compared to 2010 where 4243 (ibid.) international tourists have visited Hisarya. The number of Bulgarian tourists visiting the town is also increasing during the years, where in 2013 the number is 84872, in 2016 there are more than 103 000 tourists³.

Since the destination management has established the modernization of the infrastructure the town has become a favorite spa destination of national and international tourists (ibid.). In 2012 the resort has won the award “SPA Destination on the Balkans” and in 2015 the award for “Innovative SPA destination” which was given by the Bulgarian Association of Balneology and Spa Tourism

²<http://www.hisarnews.net/2016/05/30/%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F%D1%82-%D1%85%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%8F%D1%89%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%89%D0%B5/>

³ <http://www.bta.bg/bg/c/BO/id/999964>

who distinguished the best representatives in the sphere of spa and medical business.⁴ The award for “Innovative SPA destination” is based on the innovations such as new technologies, products, creative ideas and achievements adopted by the spa and medical business in Hisarya. The winners are eligible to apply for the European Innovation Awards given by the European Spa Association, and they also benefit from broad media coverage in Bulgaria and Europe.⁵

Since 2009 until 2016 the number of visitors in the resort has increased from 62 000 up to more than 200 000 people a year⁶. For the same period the number of night stays has also significantly increased from 162 000 in 2009 up to 278 417 in 2015. This means that the average length of stay per tourist has increased from 2,6 up to 2,9 days (Plan for sustainable development of the municipality of Hisarya in the period of 2014-2030, 2014).

In fact, Hisarya provides many accommodation opportunities: from small family guesthouses to luxurious 4-star hotels. The total capacity of beds in the region is 3000, from which 2042 are in hotels, 718 in medical sanatoriums and 120 in mountain huts. The majority of the hotels have modern spa and balneological centers offering a great variety of rehabilitation and treatment procedures. Due to that different types of segments are attracted to the destination.

Nevertheless, the resort provides various forms of entertainment and other types of tourism as well. On the territory of the destination is developed an area for sports track, suitable for off-road fans of bike, jeeps and motocross.

Another type of entertainment which might be regarded also as an attraction to the tourists is the bicycle path constructed around the fortress of Hisarya, which continues in the forest where mountain biking and off road can be experienced⁷.

Moreover, other tourist segment might be interested in the horse base in Hisarya which provides horse riding in the mountain environment⁸.

⁴ <https://bgwalk.com/bg/destinatsii/destinaciya%20-%20hisarya>

⁵ <http://www.focus-news.net/news/0000/00/00/2440135/>

⁶ <https://www.24chasa.bg/ojivlenie/article/5697196>

⁷ <https://augustaspa.com/activities-biking/?lang=en>

⁸ <https://opoznai.bg/view/konna-baza-ezdul-hisaria>

Last but not least has to be mentioned that many tourists visit the destination and the region because of the Roman baths, Roman tomb and the Thracian temple which is the largest ancient architecture of this type on the territory of Southeastern Europe⁹.

Different types of tourism can be experienced in Hisarya, which might represent the reason behind the tourists' visit to this particular destination, rather than spa and wellness facilities only. Research about this has not been performed so far, therefore the collection of new data and research in this field will be established and further the tourists' preferences will be analyzed.

In the same vein, in the future there will be demand for a combination of Spa and wellness tourism with other forms of tourism, such as wine, culture, village etc. (Strategy for sustainable tourism development in Bulgaria 2014/2030, 2014) In addition, this new tourist practice will stimulate the growth of other services in tourism. According to a research made for the Strategy for sustainable tourism development in Bulgaria 2012/2030 (2014), 48 % from the tourists utilizing Spa and wellness services are looking for an additional type of tourism, while 27% are looking for two additional types of tourism within the chosen destination.

The resorts in Bulgaria, which provide those types of tourism are situated in ecologically friendly environment and exist since ancient roman or Thracian times; therefore, those destinations provide also cultural tourism (Ibid.2014). Nevertheless, some of those destinations are situated in areas with wine production, which can be considered as a possibility to provide wine tours for the tourists.

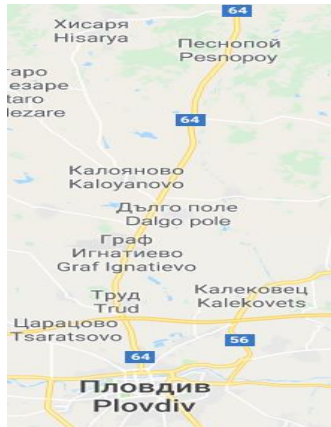
Hisarya Region has great traditions in grape and wine-production as well¹⁰. The tastings of local wines are both part of the local hospitality and a tourist attraction. Several wineries in Hisarya Region offer wine-tasting. In fact, Hisarya is located in between the mountains with a favorable climate for wine tourism. Less than 15km from the resort can be visited a winery and a cellar in a village called Starosel. Accordingly, the combination of various types tourism within the destination results in the attraction of different type of tourists.

The infrastructure and transportation in the municipality of Hisarya are in favorable condition according to Plan for sustainable development of the municipality of Hisarya in the period of 2014-

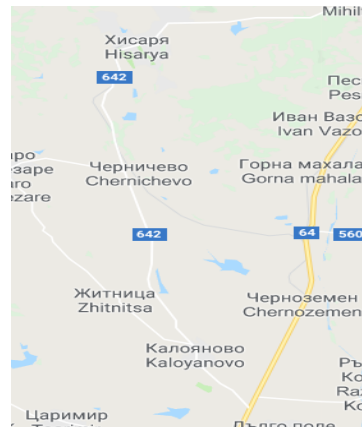
⁹ <https://www.24chasa.bg/ojivlenie/article/5697196>

¹⁰ <http://destinacia.bg/spot/%D1%85%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%8F/>

2030 (2014). However, road sections between Hisarya and village Chernichevo and Chernichevo - Kaloyanovo need to be reconstructed and renovated, this is the main road connecting Hisarya and Plovdiv.



Source: Google maps



Source: Google map

In fact, the destination can be reached by bus, car or train; within the destination the tourists can utilize taxi and bus services.

In this chapter it was covered the attractiveness of Hisarya as a Spa destination and the additional attributes and activities that the destination provides. Information and statistics have been used to provide an overview of the tourism situation in Bulgaria and Hisarya as well, in order to have an understanding of the tourism flow and the interest in this particular destination.

3. Structure of the project

The project is divided into six chapters. The first one is represented by the introduction. The second chapter presents the destination where the research will take place, its attributes, attractions and attractiveness. By having overview over the destination and its attributes it will be essential to understand afterwards the outcome of the data gathered as tourists might mention concrete types of tourism or attractions within the destination. The third chapter will introduce the theoretical approach of this master thesis. In the fourth chapter the methodology chosen for this thesis will be elaborated. The first sub-chapter will be the research design, followed by the philosophy of science and the paradigmatic approach chosen to address the research. Afterwards, will be presented the

data collection methods which are used in order to establish the research. The fifth chapter will represent an in-depth analysis which will be done by following the theoretical lenses of the push and pull factors and other sub factors. The sixth chapter includes the conclusion of the master thesis. Lastly, two sub-chapter will be also included which will present the contributions of the research to the extent literature and the second will be about other lines of research and future recommendations.

4. Literature review

In this chapter there will be presented, examined and combined theories with the view to create a theoretical structure of the thesis. The theoretical structure will be used later in the analysis section as a tool to analyze the collected data. To get a better understanding of spa destinations, literature on spa and wellness destinations and destination attractiveness will be included. Additionally, literature on spa tourists and the way they change their travel habits, their preference and motivations for visiting a spa destination will be discussed in order to examine the needs of the new spa tourist. Finally, will be discussed the theory of pull and push factors.

4.1. Spa & Wellness destinations

Recently health, medical and wellness tourism has grown significantly (Smith & Puczkó, 2013). Today the spa tourism has taken over of the original and classic *thermalism* and along with a range of different services it has been provided in spa and wellness hotels, thermal springs, hospitals, holistic retreats etc. Nowadays, spa is not just health resorts and rehabilitation centers, but modern health tourism destinations visited by healthy people with the motive of preventive health care, wellness services and relaxation, detox (detoxification), recreation. (Vesenjak, 2010).

The concept of wellness is a modern trend with ancient roots from China, India, Greece and Rome. The origin of this type threat is used in the ancient medical practice and traditions (Azman & Chan, 2016). Meyers, Sweeney and Witmer (2005) define wellness as lifestyle oriented towards optimal health good feeling in which the body, mind and soul are united for more complete life of the man

in his social and natural environment. Wellness is a philosophy, as opposed to negative and reactive approach to life, emphasizes the positive and proactive approach to life that will increase and enhance all dimensions of human existence (The Global Wellness Tourism Economy, 2013).

In fact, Spa has become one of the fastest growing sectors of health and wellness tourism (McNeil & Ragins, 2005). A spa is considered to be a place with a mineral spring which has health-giving proprieties, and a commercial establishment offering health and beauty treatment through such means as steam baths, exercise equipment, and massage (Oxford Dictionary, 2017). In fact, the spa offers are often combined in a package with a conference, cultural trip or ecological services (Smith & Puzcko, 2015). In this sense, the destination image also grows, when investments for sustainability and nature preservation are adopted (Kirigs, 2013).

According to Illing (2014) spa and wellness destination is defined as an area chosen by tourists as a travel destination to improve their state of health and well-being. This type of destinations includes necessary infrastructure and services such as accommodation, restaurants, with facilities for health and well-being.

According to Voigt and Pforr (2014) the core resources of a spa tourism destination differs from any other tourism destinations, those are the natural resources (e.g. thermal and/or mineral waters, landscapes, plants etc., which can be used for an enhancement of mental and physical well-being), cultural, historical and spiritual resources (e.g. well-being heritage sights like Roman Thermae, spiritual practices like yoga), complementary and alternative medicine offerings (e.g. meditation, balneology, homeopathy etc.), community mind set and wellness-related lifestyle (e.g. local community with health-related lifestyles), human resources and competencies (professional staff to deliver quality wellness services), wellness-specific superstructure (e.g. spa/wellness hotels, spiritual retreats, thermal springs etc.), wellness-related events (e.g. community health event), crossover of wellness with other activities/offerings (e.g. wellness services in a package with local culinary).

This chapter covered the topic about spa destinations and its core components, spa facilities and attractiveness. Regarding this research, it will be essential to understand how various tourists are driven by the need of spa activities and how they might engage in different activities within the destination. Moreover, the spa destination where the research will be conducted offers variety of

services and activities that the tourists might be interested as the way they are interested in the spa facilities.

4.2. Destination attractiveness

As a core component of literature, the destination attractiveness will be discussed in order to elaborate on the factors making it attractive.

The destination attractiveness has been widely discussed topic, both from supply and demand side approaches (Klenosky, 2002; Morachat, 2003; Formica, 2004; Formica & Uysal, 2006). From the demand side approach, the attractiveness is built on feelings, beliefs and opinions that a tourist constructs about what one might receive from the destination. The supply side of attractiveness represents the force created by the attractions present within the destination (Formica & Uysal, 2006). Accordingly, Pearce (1996) states that the tourist market represents the amenities, activities and other offerings, pulling tourists, which are put together.

Consequently, the choice of particular spa destination depends on the attributes of the destination, such as the tourism attractions, service providers and additional attributes. Whereas, the marketing information represents a crucial component that provide the tourists with information about the destination, which is needed to decide where to go, how long to stay and what to do there (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2012). In fact, Calvo et al. (2011) says that a destination with an efficient, broad and strong marketing campaign and easy accessibility would be more attractive than one that is barely present in the media. However, it must be considered that the marketing campaign can play also a negative role if it is not based on what the destination has to offer, as an unsatisfied tourist will not be willing to return or recommend the destination.

Corrales (2017) defines the destination attractiveness based on the definitions above as a sum of feelings and perceptions a tourist develops towards the attributes of a specific destination. Whereas, the level of interaction between the visitors and the destination, the level of tourism development in the destination, the availability of tourism amenities, the support from stakeholders

affect the perceived and realized benefits of tourism (Sirgy, 2012). In fact, according to Marseu (2011), the components together which influence the tourists' decision must be able to make the stay and the travel experience as pleasant as possible and provide the greatest pleasure to the visitors.

The interaction between supply and demand affects the tourists' experience in which the simultaneous production and consumption of goods take place (Sirgy, 2012). Therefore, the attractiveness of a destination depends on the availability of resources and the degree to which those resources are bundled by the destination management in order to meet visitors' expectations and needs at the destination (Kozak, 2004). In this sense, the management of the destination is responsible for the development of infrastructure, the creation of facilities and promotion of tourist attractions, the professional development of the tourism staff, which will enhance the competitiveness of the destination and hence increase its attractiveness (Valls et al, 2014).

Calvo et al. (2011) argues also that there is a relation between the destination attractiveness and its image, whereas the image represents the power to influence the tourist's perception of quality, satisfaction and willingness to return. Furthermore, the construction of the attractiveness includes all the components of the destination and the linkages between them.

On the figure below can be seen the relation between the components which build the destination attractiveness and the way they interact.

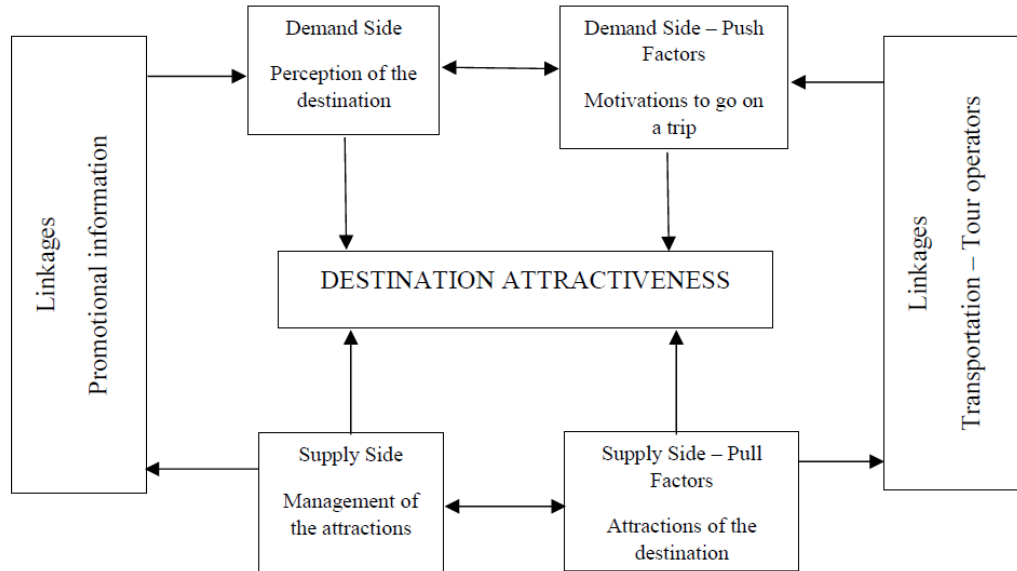


Figure 1. Destination attractiveness components. *Source: J. Corrales, Factors influencing tourism destinations attractiveness, 2017*

The figure presents the model of destination attractiveness, in which are presented the components and their relation which influence the attractiveness of a destination. Firstly, there is the supply side with the pull factors, those are the attractions or resources that a destination owns. In the same vein, the supply side is responsible for the management of the resources such as strategies and actions for the development of the destination. While, the (in)efficient management influences the linkages such as the transportation and the easiness to obtain information about the destination (Corrales, 2017).

Secondly, we have the demand side with the push factors such as the tourists' personal motivations and reasons to travel (Klenosky, 2002). Wherefrom, the selection of the destination is based on the desires of the tourists and the attributes of the destination which might fulfill the tourists' expectations. In the second place for the demand side, there is the tourists' perception of the destination which is based on the tourist's feelings about the destination. Here, important role plays the management of the resources, as the existence of attractive resources which are managed adequately would awake satisfactory feelings in the consumers towards the destination, influencing the production of attractiveness as a result (Corrales, 2017).

In the same vein, as principal factors that influence the attractiveness of a destination Formica (2004) identifies economic factors (exchange rates, cost of living), socio – cultural factors (hospitality, attitude towards the tourist), infrastructures and natural factors.

Wherefrom, the basic for the attractiveness of spa tourism destination is regarded to be the natural healing factor, which plays the role as a decisive motivator for visiting the destination and use its products. Balneological, thermal and mineral water, climatic, other natural healing factors, along with accommodation facilities, entertainment and hospitality, create the spa tourism destination (Tomic, 2006). Those factors represent the ability of the destination to pull certain tourists and those attributes are also called *pull factors* (Taplin, 2012).

Nevertheless, the spa destination needs to provide various spa and wellness services in order to promote the physical, mental and social well-being with the help of natural healing and environmental factors, as well as sports, recreational and cultural contents. The arrangements of the tourist area are also necessary such as parks, walking trails, places for relaxation and leisure (Milovanovic, 2012).

In fact, the spa tourism itself represents one of the factors which influence the tourist choice, however many other forms of tourism might be included to create the perfect spa destination to visit. This is because, the new tourist from 21st century is curious, knowledgeable and interested in the destination itself, rather than one certain service that is provided (Tomic, 2006).

This chapter covered the topic of destination attractiveness and the factors influencing it, such as the demand (push) and supply (pull) approaches. It was also discussed what a spa tourism destination needs to possess in terms of attributes, in order to be attractive.

4.3. Spa tourists: a changing market

In 21st century wellness tourism has become a global phenomenon with an imperative for the successful development of health tourism destinations. Over the past centuries, health and wellness-oriented activities have been recognized around the world with differences in the health

practices of the people in different regions, who wants to stay healthy, heal and cure themselves (Myers et al., 2005). Wherefrom, Nahrstedt (2004) describes wellness as a way of life one creates to achieve highest potential of well-being, which consists of four elements – physical activity, spiritual activity, healthy and natural nutrition and personal relaxation (Myers et al., 2005).

The development of health tourism can be a result of the great economic growth and major demographic shift, where more and more European destinations are becoming popular (Yeoman, 2008). While, in the late 1980s and 1990s most of the wellness destinations have been located in Asia (Koncul, 2012).

Important to mention is the statement from Smith and Puczkò (2009) that the concept of wellness differs from country to country. In most countries of Central Europe and Eastern Europe wellness is viewed through the healing of thermal mineral water and spa, while in Southern Europe the emphasis is on the sea wellness and Mediterranean diet contribute to the well-being of the individual. In contrast, in Scandinavia, the external activities such as Nordic walking, skiing, swimming in lakes during winter is considered as a way of well-being. In Finland, saunas are part of the individuals home, which is part of the everyday wellness. While in Asia, wellness is seen through spiritual activities such as yoga, meditation, and different types of massages. On opposite, USA, Canada, Australia and England, wellness is focused onto the daily spas or beauty and health salons, which offer cosmetic treatments and care, leisure activities and relaxations (Smith and Puczkò, 2009).

The main role however, stays the same – health care. This project will be based on the concept of wellness on the way that Central and Eastern Europe see it through the healing of thermal mineral water and spa. In this sense, traditionally it has been seen that mainly women are involved in wellness activities, as the reason for this is that women have been more interested in physical appearance, weight issues and make up than men (Smith and Puzcko, 2008). However, in contrast to that Sherman, Clemenz and Phillip (2007) state that there is an emerging male market within the spa industry as well.

Previously almost all tourists have been seniors with lower incomes, while currently spa tourists are typically 30-40 years old with higher income. Tourists from 20 to 25 years old are the group increasingly interested in this type of tourism, while age group of tourists of 50 - 65 years still has the greatest potential (Radnic, 2009).

The reasons to visit spa are researched by many authors (Marvel, 2002; Philips and Drummond, 2001; Mintel, 2005; Grihault, 2007) the research showed that tourists have different motivations such as relaxation escapes, longevity treatments, beauty, and tranquility.

One of the researches linked to spa tourists is from Mak and Wong (2007). The research has been established for the Hong Kong spa goers and the total of responses has reached 302. According to their research, the spa goers perceive spa as a place for relaxation, pampering, beautifying treatments, and enhancement of overall health. Mak and Wong (2007) distinguished the motivations into “*relaxation and relief*”, “*escape*”, “*self-reward and indulgence*”, and “*health and beauty*’ factors.

Different segments of spa tourists can be distinguished based on their needs and aims.

Healthy people

Smith and Kelly (2006) stated that the spa tourists are healthy people which primary aim of their trip is to preserve their health. Those type of tourists are actively health seekers who are highly motivated and determined to play an active role in their own health. Most of those wellness tourists are already active at home in activities such as yoga, meditation, healthy food, massages etc. Myers et al. (2005) define the wellness as a way of enriching optimal health and good feeling, in which the body, mind and soul are united for one more complete life of man. This type of lifestyle guarantees the individual health, happiness and self-realization (Myers et al., 2005).

People with stressful lifestyles

Due to stressful lifestyle, the need for mental relaxation and health preservation has increased over the world, and spa has become a part of the health care of the people worldwide. The reason behind that might be based on the economic crises and unemployment, dissatisfaction and depression that the individual experience during the past years (Koncul, 2012). Novelli (2006) says also that the demand for healthy options and the growth of health consciousness have increased not only in the people’s daily routine but also during their leisure and holidays.

Nowadays, the healthy lifestyle has become a trend among the tourists based on changing values and standard of living. Lifestyle is healthy if it deals with health-related elements and activities, such as participation in sports, control of daily diet, health treatments, and positive use of leisure time. Therefore, the healthy lifestyle has become responsible for proliferation of spa, gyms, fitness centers, massage centers and health resorts (Urh, 2015).

Benefit seekers

Other researchers (Pesonen, Laukkanen & Komppula, 2011) have tried to segment the wellbeing tourists according to the benefits they seek, the results have concluded four segments of well-being tourists: outdoor type, nature enthusiasts, sightseers and culture tourists. Those are some of the additional attributes that the tourists are seeking while being in a spa destination.

Another important term for the well-being is happiness. Traveling creates happiness in many levels, by visiting friends and families, engaging in relaxing activities and entertainments. That might represent one of the benefits the tourists try to gain by taking spa holidays in different spa destinations (Koncul, 2012).

As final reflection for this chapter, Global Wellness Institute (2014) has identified two types of wellness travelers based on their motivations which is similar to the above-mentioned segmentation; tourists who take a trip entirely based on wellness purposes (primary spa travelers) and those who engage in spa activities as part of their trip (secondary spa travelers). In fact, the secondary spa travelers constitute the largest segment and rank 87% of spa tourism trips and 84% of expenditures.

In this chapter it was discussed the topic of spa tourists, the reasons behind their wellness travels, their needs and lifestyles. Those reflections will be further used in the analysis chapter in order to analyze the tourists' profiles and their motivations for visiting the specific spa destination.

4.4. Tourists' preferences and perceptions

Recently many researchers (Decrop, 2005; Bergeman, 2006; Castro, 2007; Hamilton, 2007) have started looking onto the tourists' preferences and motivations, due to the fact that the tourists are becoming increasingly demanding and selective about their holiday travel. Preferences provide data about what the tourists look for on a trip, their motivation for taking the trip, and prior expectations and experiences (Decrop, 2005).

Preference have been also regarded as a critical element to explain travel behavior at a destination and the tourists' activities. Castro (2007) has adopted the activity-based segmentation in order to distinguish the visitors by their behavior and visitation patterns. Since, certain travelers may prefer sightseeing or visiting historic places, while others may focus on different activities such as sunbathing and sports. Hamilton (2007) says that using activity as a segmentation base, it is possible that different types of attractions will appeal to different types of visitors.

Fuller & Matzler (2008) state that lifestyle also represents a crucial part of the tourists' behavior in consuming products and services, choosing a vacation destination and activities. The concept of tourists' lifestyle is defined as patterns reflecting consumer's activities, interests and opinions (AIO) (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2006). AIO measurements illustrate how the customers spend their time for various activities such as sports, shopping, entertainment, work; how they are committed to things which are important and interesting for them, and their opinions about culture, education, future (Plummer, 1974). The AIO model has been often used since it is assumed to be a shorter and easier method of uncovering the core issues of why and how the consumers choose a particular service/brand/destination over another (Mohammad & Som, 2010).

The lifestyle dimensions' model will be further used for the data collection method in order to investigate the tourists' behavior for choosing a specific spa destination.

Table 2. Lifestyle dimensions. Source: Plummer, 1974

Lifestyle dimensions			
Activities	Interests	Opinions	Demographics
Work	Family	Themselves	Age
Hobbies	Home	Social issues	Education
Social events	Job	Politics	Income
Vacations	Community	Business	Occupation
Entertainment	Recreation	Economics	Family size
Club membership	Fashion	Education	Dwelling
Community	Food	Products	Geographic
Shopping	Media	Future	City size
Sports	Achievements	Culture	Stage in life cycle

In the same vein, Chen et al. (2010) stated that in order to consider tourists preferences, motivation factors have to be incorporated. The motivation factors highlight what the travelers want to accomplish on their trip and the personal benefits they expect to gain. In fact, Lehto (2004)

interpreted these factors as a *level of appreciation*, considering how the traveler appreciate activities such as nature, cultural heritage awareness, dining, shopping and outdoor recreation. While others (Nicolau & Mas, 2005) describe it as a level of interest; interest in new culture and new places.

Mohammad and Som (2010) define that the motivation factors may be used in order to define the *tourists' perception of the destination*. The authors stated that a destination is perceived based on the attributes that the destination provides and the ability for the travelers to relax, gain knowledge, have excitement and be social. Chen et al. (2010) defined that tourists' perceptions are linked to the destination image. The tourists' perceptions are defined as a process that involves cognitive, affective and emotional components that helps an individual tourist to form image of the destination visited. Vogt and Andereck (2003) describe perceptions as a process by which the individual selects, organizes and interprets information about a product or destination. In addition, Meng and Uysal (2008) found that some personal characteristics influence the way tourists perceive places, such as gender, age, occupation, education and social classes.

These findings are highly relevant for this research project because the main topic is related to the preferences of the tourists for going on a holiday in a specific spa destination and the reasons for choosing it. Therefore, the information provided in this section will be compared with the findings of the project.

4.5. Push and pull factors theory

The push and pull factor theory will be elaborated in this project as it is considered important for the research and the outcome of the analysis. The theory offers a tool which will help in the process of analyzing the preferences and perceptions of the tourists to visit specific spa destination. The theory of push-pull factors represents the decomposition of the tourist's choice of destination into two forces, which are push and pull factors (Bowen & Clarke, 2009).

The push and pull factors theory has been discussed by many researchers during the years (Page & Connell, 2006; Bowen & Clarke, 2009; Kassean & Gassita, 2013), as it is considered as useful approach for examining tourist motivation and visitation behavior, including destination attributes, choice of travel destination and travel activities conducted in a selected destination.

In this sense, Seebaluck et al., (2013) distinguished that push factors are more related to emotional aspects and tourists' personal attributes or the demand-side approach which is to understand the tourists' decision making such as attitudes and perceptions, while pull factors are those that attract the individual to a specific destination, and which are connected to external, situational, or cognitive aspects.

In accordance to spa destinations, push factors are more origin-oriented, intangible or intrinsic desires of the individual travelers, such as the desire for *escape, rest and relaxation, health and fitness, adventure, prestige and social interaction* (Kassean & Gassita, 2013). According to Guha (2009) novelty and escape from monotony of daily life are the most common travelling motivators. On the other hand, pull factors are those that emerge as a result of the attractiveness of the destination, perceived by the traveler. Those are tangible recourses, such as recreation facilities, historic resources and nature as well as the travelers' *expectations of benefits and the marketing image of the destination* (Gillet et al., 2012).

4.5.1. Criticism of the push and pull theory

However, in the past years, the theory has been also criticized by many authors (Bowen & Clarke, 2009; Mehmetoglu, 2013; Ngyuen, 2014). They argue that the factors cannot be used separately, and one cannot be used without the other. Ngyuen (2014) argues that there are three different types of push and pull theorists. The first ones are the once who deny the role of pull factors because they are explanations of touristic activities and they have to be removed from the study of tourism motivations (Klenosky, 2002, Nicolau and Mass, 2006). The second type of theorists claim that both push and pull factors are travel motives, while the pull factors are the supporting role. The last group of the researchers argue that the outcome of push and pull factors is almost equal (Mehmetoglu, 2013; Ngyuen, 2014).

Another critic is discussed by Bowen and Clarke (2009) who says that the theory is mostly used in academic research and the main focus is onto international tourists rather than domestic. However, they also mentioned that there are few researches made for domestic tourists, one in a Korean park and one Australian study. However, in this project the use of both pull and push factors will be established, where the main focus will be domestic tourists.

The framework of this research will integrate the individual's perceptions of the destination's attributes by adopting both push and pull factors concept, in order to explain the tourists' preferences in choosing this specific destination for their spa trip. This research will contribute for a better understanding of the motives for travelling in this destination and will present an overview of the attributes that makes it attractive to the tourists.

Based on the stated theories, further in this project will be conducted an analysis of discovered patterns for the preference and perceptions of the tourists who choose to travel to specific spa destination, based on its additional attributes.

5. Methodology

The object of the methodology chapter is to present a comprehensive understanding of methodological factors, choices and determinations of this research. This section will explain the methods used in collecting the necessary data, which would lead to delivering the best possible answers to the research question. The aim of the research is exploratory, and it will try to examine the inner motivations and preference of the tourists who visit spa destinations, based on the additional attributes provided rather than the spa procedures and thermal water.

The section will be divided in several parts: the research design, the philosophy of science and the research methods and the set of processes involved to collect the required information. It will be described the mindset behind the collection of data, it will be further explained why the chosen methods were the best approach of gathering data. At the end of this chapter it will be discussed the validity and reliability of the findings, and also highlighted the limitations which confronted the research process.

5.1. Research design

This sub-chapter aims to provide an overview of the process of writing the master thesis. The project starts with an introduction, where the reader is familiarized with the topic of this research. Before the writing of the project could begin, information of the topic was needed. Information was gathered through literature review and desk research. The literature review was constructed on the literature from books and articles, from different subjects in order to find the most suitable literature for the studied topic. Within the problem formulation, the research question and the sub-questions of the research were presented. The aim of this research was to understand the inner motivations, preferences and perceptions of certain age group of tourists visiting one spa destination over another.

A specific destination was chosen due to the possibility to collect data from tourists in different hotels and attractions. An interview guide was written and was used. To answer the research question qualitative primary data has been collected by both semi-structured interviews and observation. This data collection approach was chosen to be relative for the research, since concrete opinions and meanings could be collected, specifically related to the problem formulation and the research. The semi-structured interview gave the possibility to ask different questions depending on the way the conversation was going, which made it easier to get close to the tourists and get as concrete answers as possible. The observation approach was chosen because it provided with a clear overview over the tourists' attractions, the town and the places which the tourists mostly visit, and the interests the different age group of tourists have. The data collected was used to analyze the stated problem, by real time opinions and information. Moreover, the data was specific to the needs of the research topic and tried to answer the main and the two sub-questions:

What influences tourists' choice of a SPA destination?

- *How the tourists choose a specific spa destination?*
- *What attributes and activities a spa destination need to possess in order to be attractive to the tourists?*

Consequently, by using the conceptional lenses of the motivational theories of push and pull factors, the analysis of the findings has been done. Lastly, conclusions were stated in the final chapter among other suggestions for further research.

5.2. Philosophy of science

The paradigm is important to be elaborated because it dictates and influences how and what should be studied, the way the research is done and the way the results are interpreted (Bryman, 2016). According to Long (2007), paradigm is the way we see the world around us and, in this case, the defined problem formulation. Therefore, it is important to define paradigms, because the nature of the research depends upon the researcher's beliefs about the world and the way to conduct the investigations (Long, 2007).

The thesis was written under the interpretivist paradigm, this is because the social phenomena is studied in its natural setting (Saunders, 2009). The research is conducted among people rather than objects, where the researcher adopts an emphatic stance to understand the social world and to understand the world from their point of view (Saunders, 2009). This type of research has a flexible research structure, as interpretivists avoid an inflexible structure as in positive research (Carson et al., 2001) which gives the possibility to make adjustments based on the collected data.

Therefore, the author of this master thesis acknowledges that there is no universal truth about any given statement and that the answers given to the problem formulation cannot be estimated as absolute and final. The analysis and conclusion sections must be regarded as an understanding of the tourists' preferences and motivations influenced by their social existence (Ingemann, 2013). The researcher's quest is not to find right or wrong answers but rather a meaning towards the research question within the data collected by using theories. An emphasize on the nature of knowledge is considered as each actor has its own identity shaped by personally accepted truths. Acknowledging that there is no universal truth, it is important to mention that the data and the findings of this project will be biased by the viewpoint of the author (Klausen, 2012).

5.3. Ontology

Ontology refers to the research of reality, being or existence (Bryman, 2012; Ingemann, 2013). The questions usually asked about the logic behind a process would be: “*What is the nature of reality?*” or “*What is the nature of the knowable?*” (Guba, 1990).

There are two types of ontology: objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism is characterized as a situation of existing reality and pre-existing behavior (Hannam & Knox, 2010). Where subjectivism is characterized as a creation of the social actor’s perceptions (Saunders et al, 2009). This thesis will be based on subjective view as the interviewed tourists have expressed their perceptions and motivations for visiting the specific destination.

Since, for data collection method was applied qualitative interviewing, it can be pointed that the ontological position of the researcher is *constructivism*. This is because the aim of the researcher will be to understand the variety of meanings, experiences and opinions of the research topic, as well as the inner motivations for choosing a specific destination over another (Creswell, 2003). However, important to acknowledge is that this can lead to different outcomes, and vary in the situations as people are different, they have different views and experiences (Saunders et al, 2009).

5.4. Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the way knowledge is created and how the social world is studied (Hannam & Knox, 2010). Epistemology is about how to get the knowledge and represents the relationship between the knower and the knowable (Long, 2007). According to Richards and Munsters (2010), knowledge is subjective and is co-created during the interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. This means that the result of the research is influenced by the researcher’s and the interviewees knowledge.

Therefore, interpretivism as an epistemological stance is adopted in the thesis. Interpretivism requires the researcher to uncover the meanings of the interview respondents and further to interpret them. Interpretation can be defined as finding sense out of given situation, i.e. understanding the surrounding reality through one’s personal knowledge (Ingemann, 2013).

The interviews and observation conducted regarding tourists' preferences and motivations to visit a specific spa destination rather than another will be interpreted to find useful information which will be further analyzed.

Additionally, deduction was applied as a research approach. This means that the project aims to explain why tourists choose one spa destination over another through the prism of the existing theories about tourist motivations, preferences and perceptions.

5.5. Data collection

The data collection section is explaining the process of info gathering that led the research to the final results. In this project the qualitative approach was chosen to be most relative for the validity of answering the problem formulation and research questions. By using qualitative methods, the researcher tried to understand the motivations, perceptions and preferences of the tourists visiting the spa destination (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the qualitative researchers study the things in their natural settings, by attempting to interpret the meanings the people bring. In fact, in this research, the researcher has used the qualitative approach as face-to-face interviews with tourists have been conducted, which have been further interpreted to find meanings and patterns. Furthermore, the social constructivism paradigm and qualitative research have elements which complement each other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This means that when doing qualitative research there is a need of interpretation in order to analyze the collected data, which is affected by both the researcher and the interviewee. In the same vein, when applying qualitative methods, it is important to mention that the focus is on the participants in the discussion, however the outcome is influenced by the researcher's point of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Taking in consideration, that the project is made in English, and the interviews were conducted in Bulgarian, it is possible that when the translation was made, some discrepancies might have appeared, however the meaning of the answers was kept. Important to mention is that the knowledge of the researcher has influence over the research as well as the subjective view over the world of the interviewees. This is because, the researcher also interprets and constructs the reality based on her experiences and interactions with the environment. Before conducting the research, the researcher had some knowledge about the topic, however gained more in-depth

knowledge when researching about it. Furthermore, it must be mentioned that the study was done through the use of theoretical frameworks and certain methods, which helped to analyze the data through the lenses of various theories. As mentioned above the aim of this project is to analyze various perspectives of the interviewees regarding the topic, rather than searching for a single truth.

Qualitative research includes various types of methods which can be used to better understand the interpretable reality. This is because, the methods are based on people's perceptions about their experience, social practice and perceptions (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010). The qualitative methods chosen for this project are semi-structured interviews and observation.

5.6. Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured qualitative interview method was chosen as it is believed to be useful tool to collect data on motivations and perceptions of tourists, because it is flexible method of asking questions (Bryman, 2008). By using an interview, the researcher's aim is to know what the interviewee thinks and feels about the life (Hannam & Knox, 2010), to understand the interviewees' experience and provide perspectives within the research topic (Kvale, 2007).

According to Bittner (2011), the semi structured interview is the adequate method for exploratory research, as it gives the researcher the possibility to stay focused on the goals of the interview and in the same time allow the participants to express themselves in greater depth than a structured interview. Moreover, the semi-structured interview allows the researcher to skip or add questions in order to control the conversation (Bittner, 2011). According to Veal (2006), the interviewer should not get lost in the discussion, by becoming the leading speaker instead of the respondent. Therefore, during the interviews the researcher did not agree, disagree or suggest answers to the respondents, instead the researcher used open questions and tried to encourage the semi-structured interview. The topic and the reason behind the interview were explained, as it was considered that it will motivate the respondents to take part in the interview.

When preparing the questions for the semi-structured interview, some of them were considered very structured which will not provide with enough information, therefore another way of creating

them was established. In fact, open-ended questions were created, and the interviews were based mostly on conversation, rather than questions and answers.

The semi-structured interview is based on the literature previously used in this project. Some questions were invented in connection with the theory of destination attractiveness, in order to get data about what knowledge the tourists have about the studied destination, the number of times they have visited it, the attractions that they are aware of, and effects of the mineral water. By asking those questions, information about the attractiveness of the studied destination was collected.

Other questions were connected to the tourists' preferences and perceptions when choosing this spa destination. This was considered important as it will give the possibility to understand the inner preference of the tourists when choosing a spa destination based on the attractions and activities that the tourists are looking for. Lastly, the semi-structured interview includes questions based on the tourists' profiles, their interests, opinions, values and activities. Consequently, by the use of those data, answers can be given to the questions asked in the beginning of the project and analysis over that can be established.

5.6.1. Data justification

Qualitative interviews are supposed to be recorded or scripted. According to Long (2007), who argues that recording an interview often gives the researcher time to concentrate on asking questions in a more concrete way and makes the event more formal, was decided the recording to be excluded as an option for data storage. This is because, by the use of scripts and writing notes, the atmosphere of the interview will be informal, and the respondents will feel relaxed when talking about themselves; about their preferences and motivations.

Moreover, concerns about that the interviewees are tourists having their holiday was taken into account, therefore it was considered inappropriate to record them in their free time and ask them to participate in a formal discussion. In fact, the tourists were approached in the hotel lobby where there were many people and a formal recording would be challenging to perform, due to sound issues and the willingness of the tourists to participate in front of others. Therefore, scripting was

applied, due to its informal avenue and the opportunity for the respondents to provide information with higher validity and reliability, as they will not be feeling stressed and pushed to answer if recording them.

Another justification of the data concerns ethical issues when interviewing and collecting information. Following the statement of Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) that ethical issues are influencing and having a part in an interview research, which requires a balance between the researcher's need to gain efficient knowledge and ethical respect to the subject of the interview. Therefore, while trying to perform the interviews, the participants were informed about the project and the reason to conduct the interview, after they were asked if they would like to participate in order to give them the right to choose, while considering the ethical issues. In fact, there were tourists who did not want to participate whom decisions were accepted, others choose to participate but their answers might be vague and inconsistent compared to others, as slight sign of reluctance was acknowledged. Whereas, the principal of 'no harm' was considered, as sometimes a conflict between the right to know and the right of privacy may happen (Bloor, 2006). Consequently, to find the balance, the participants remained anonymous, as on this way the confidentiality and informed consent was kept (Stake, 2010).

5.6.2. Sampling

Sampling is a smaller collection of units from a population used to determine truths about that population (Field, 2005). According to Long (2007) the number of the interview respondents has to be a small sample of people set, thus in qualitative interview the number of subject tends to be either too small or too large. Therefore, if the number of subjects is too small it is not possible to make generalization, however if it is too large then it is not possible to make interpretations of the interviews (Long, 2007). Moreover, in the process of selecting the participants, the researcher must be aware of two major principles: representativeness and quality (Alvesson, 2011). In other words, the representativeness is based on the ability to have variation among the interviewees, so that they allow the covering of all kinds of people within the area one aims to address (ibid.).

In addition, when planning data collection for a research, the number of participants is enough when additional participants do not provide any additional insights, this phenomenon is called *saturation* (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). According to Guest et al. (2006) the saturation in qualitative research occurs around 12 participants in homogenous groups. In the same vein, a research made by Latham (2013) shows that saturation appeared around 11 participants. In fact, Crouch and McKenzie (2006), propose that 20 participants in a qualitative study helps the researcher to build and maintain the relationship and improve the exchange of information. Therefore, to ensure that saturation have occurred, it was considered to go beyond the point of saturation in order to make sure that no new major concepts emerge in the next few interviews or observations.

Consequently, when taking into consideration all pointed above opinions, for the purpose of this project it was deliberated that a sample size of around 10-20 participants could guarantee precision of results. After considering the saturation approach, the exact number of collected interviews is 14.

Additionally, non-probability sampling will be applied for this project by the use of convenience sampling, which is known to be mainly used for pilot studies and exploratory research (Maxwell, 2013). The advantages of convenience sampling are that the participants are readily available, and the data collected is useful as it will provide with quick understanding of certain trend or will help develop hypothesis for future research (Given, 2008). Convenience sampling is a form of non-probability sampling which allows to select the participants for the research based on their convenience (for the researcher) rather than any other formal sample design (Saunders et al. 2012). This means that the participants have been chosen randomly and based on that who seemed conveniently available to participate in the research. This method has been discouraged by a few authors (Light et al. 1990; Morgan, 2008) due to the relevance of bias, sampling errors and inability to generalize research findings.

However according to Saunders et al. (2012) convenience sampling may be the only option in a specific situation, i.e. the ability to negotiate with certain organization where the case study could be established. In the same vein, Maxwell (2013) argues that in qualitative research the typical way of selecting individuals is neither probability sampling or convenience sampling, but rather *purposeful selection* (purposive sampling). Maxwell (2013) argues that in this strategy particular

persons are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to the questions and the goals of the research, which cannot be accomplished by other ways. The purposeful selection of participants was established in one of the hotels in the destination, as this hotel provides variety of spa facilities and attracts different tourist's groups, i.e. age groups. Moreover, other purposeful selection was to reach the tourists at different touristic places, as on this way observation and information by them was gathered regarding those touristic places.

Therefore, by considering those statements, the participants were chosen by the age they seem to be, the aim was to reach people in their 30s to 50s, as they were considered the main current tourist segment utilizing spa, as also mentioned in the literature review (Radnic, 2009; Medina-Munoz, 2013).

Moreover, according to the theories stated previously, this tourist segment is the main one interested in utilizing spa and visiting spa destinations, therefore the exploratory research will aim to understand their preferences and motivations for choosing one spa destination over another.

5.6.3. Respondents

In the project, the interviewees will be referred as respondents. According to Harboe (2010) respondents are persons who might be relevant to the project, while for the purpose of this study respondents are people who are interviewed to obtain data. In relation with the selection of the respondents Long (2007) argues that qualitative research involves forms of purposive sampling in which people are chosen deliberately for who they are and what they know.

For this purpose, the researcher has decided to interview a specific age group of tourists, due to the fact that different age groups might have different preferences and perceptions of the topic which will lead to different outcome of the interviews that might not be comparable. The respondents were selected against the criteria for age from 30-50 years, while both man and women were interviewed.

5.6.4. Process of conducting the interviews

Before the interview took place, the participants were informed about the interview topic, their anonymity and confidentiality. Details about the study were mentioned, such as the fact that the research is connected with the motivations and perceptions of tourists to visit spa destinations and based on what they choose them. As by mentioning this, the respondents will have an idea of what the researcher will ask and might have a secureness, moreover it might increase the chance for getting a higher amount answers (Gill et al. 2008). It was essential to provide full anonymity of the interviewees, as in this case they felt comfortable to talk and express their opinions (Vaus, 2012). Additionally, real names of the participants were not asked and not provided (Veal, 2011). The interviews were face-to-face. The responses were registered and interpreted as they were said.

Some of the semi-structured interviews were carried out in hotel Hissar during March 2018. Collaboration with the hotel staff was established in order to have the access to freely reach the tourists and ask for conducting an interview. Other interviews were conducted in April 2018, the tourists were reached at different touristic places around the city. It was considered that the respondents are having holiday and one might not be willing to spend their time to conduct an interview. Therefore, it was necessary to find the right moment to reach the tourists, without interfering their activities, and to find who was willing to share opinions. It was also considered that the answers might be vague if the respondents want to finish the interview as fast as possible. Moreover, it was considered that they were on holiday and their mood also had an influence over the discussion.

5.7. Participant Observation

Participant observation was applied for this project in order to gain insights on the experience of the tourists, and a rich detailed description of their behavior, intentions, situations and events. The advantage of the participant observation in a research is that it can reveal behavior that cannot be communicated in an interview as well as the bias caused by the interviewer will be reduced (Malhotra & Birks, 2005).

This research method allowed the researcher to participate in the activities as a member of the group (Saunders et al., 2007). Where four characteristics of the method applied: watching people doing something, listen to what they say, as well as asking them questions (Gilham, 2000). In this study, the researcher took part in the activities as a complete observer without revealing her identity, i.e. as a *complete participant* (Saunders et al., 2007). Due to the fact, that participants' awareness was regarded as a disadvantage for this research, since their behavior might be influenced by the awareness that they are being observed (Saunders et al., 2007).

Since this study is exploratory research, unstructured participant observation was applied, where flexibility was the main factor which helped the researcher to observe every element relevant to the problem (Malhotra & Birks, 2005).

The use of delayed project method was established for the participant observation in this project. This means that I have written down the notes from the participant observation afterwards. However, I have made videos which are also attached in the appendix. On this way, I had the possibility to be completely involved in the observation and be a part of this experience as a tourist. Disadvantages of this method were considered, as the notes might not be as accurate as I have written them down during the observations (Philips & Stawarski, 2008). However, the notes were written down right after the observations in order to avoid forgetting.

My position in Hisarya

During my stay in Hisarya I have visited couple of events held in the city during March and April 2018. Firstly, I have visited an event of cultural and creative activities which was about the traditions of the bread in the region. They have presented different types of bread and the history behind their origin. There I have seen many people, most of them were from the region and the town and a few were tourists. Another interesting event that took place in the town was the Youth national competition for favorite song. The participants were from all the parts of Bulgaria and from different age groups. The competition lasted three days and the participants have stayed in different hotels in the town. There were people coming from Varna, Burgas, Svishtov, Ruse, Sofia etc. This event is held every year during the spring which brings more and more people from different places in the country to the town of Hisarya. In the appendix photos from the competition and the event have been attached where one can see the sponsors ads of the event, which are Hotel Hissar, Hotel Augusta, Mineral water Hissar production and etc.

I went to the Roman tomb in Hisarya and saw two tourists who have been already inside, it was during noon. I have asked the receptionist there if many people are visiting the tomb, and he told me that a lot of tourists are coming but mostly during the summer months.

I have been also walking around in the parks where I have seen many tourists taking a walk and others riding a bicycle. I have recognized them as they were talking about the directions and the places they were at (park and sightseeing). The tourists riding bicycles had rented them from the hotels as one can see that the bikes look the same, as well as they were talking about directions and where to go, pictures can be seen in the appendix.

I have seen many people around the town and the touristic places, which I have mentioned in the chapter about Hisarya. Tourists were reading the tourists signs and maps and were taking photos at the attractions. There were also many people who were getting water from the water facilities in the city center, where one can get mineral hot water for home, pictures are added in the appendix. One can argue that those people are also regarded as tourists, who visit the city to get mineral water for free, since the water is good for drinking and helps for fighting different diseases. It was efficient experience to take a walk and observe what the people do, as I was also a tourist there I was interested in the history and architecture of the Roman fortress. I saw people jogging and running, and others just sitting on a bench and relaxing. While walking close to them I have heard how they were having a conversation about the city and what other attractions to visit, the parks and the greenery of the city. They were talking about the hotel they are staying at, and discussing about the spa and what facilities to try later on.

It was essential to experience the town as a tourist in order to gain a clear picture of the attractions as well as what the tourists can do there. The parks and the left roman fortress around the city are real experience which cannot be compared with any other destination. The town has three central parks which are close to all the hotels and one can jump from one to another as they are connected with a path. The town has a relaxing atmosphere and offers different activities for entertainment, which makes it very attractive to the tourists, counting myself as one of them.

While being there I have been also to a Folklore competition, where again the participants were from all the parts of Bulgaria. The competition took place at the square in front of the theater, where people can just stop by and watch the performance, which was free. Moreover, the theater is situated closely to few hotels. Important to mention is that the destination provides with a lot of

different events and competitions which makes it popular and recognized by many people in Bulgaria.

This participant observation helps me to understand that the tourists actually are interested in different activities while staying within the destination. They are not only having a spa holiday, but also a cultural and relaxing trip, by exploring the town while cycling, walking, or jogging.

5.8. Data analysis approach

After collecting the data from the stated previously methods, patterns will be identified from the scripted interviews. The collected data for this research will be analyzed by the use of qualitative data analysis. Firstly, the use of coding will help to identify topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed by the participant's narratives and interpreted by the researcher (Pharm, 2015). This process will enable the researcher to start to understand the world from each participant's perspective. Consequently, the coding will be done by highlighting and naming the sections of the text.

Afterwards, by the use of themes the data will be differentiated and further analyzed. The theming refers to the drawing of codes from one or more transcripts to present the findings of qualitative research in a coherent and meaningful way (Pharm, 2015). In fact, there might be examples across the participants' narratives for a similar activity or preference which might be drawn together as a theme. By the use of themes, it will be possible to present the data from the interviews using quotations from the individual transcripts. Underneath each theme will be the codes, examples from the scripts and the researcher's own interpretation of what the themes means.

The themes that are distinguished and will be used further in the analysis are: **attractiveness of the destination**, **reasons for choosing this destination**, **motivations for spa**, tourists' interests, **combination of spa with other types of tourism**.

5.9. Trustworthiness of the research

Trustworthiness of qualitative research has been recognized by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who suggest that there are four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility (confidence in the “truth” of the findings), transferability (showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts), dependability (showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated), and confirmability (the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest)(Pharm, 2015).

5.12.1. Credibility

In this project the use of multiple-methods has been undertaken, as two different qualitative methods observation and semi-structured interviews, have been used in order to provide credibility, since according to Bryman (2012), the use of multiple-methods gives the project more credibility. Multiple-methods, known also as triangulation, is where more than one method of collecting data is applied (Saunders et al. 2007).

The observations were conducted to find out the behavior and the preferences of the tourists. While carrying out the interviews the researcher informed the participants about the purpose of the study and asked if the interview could be used in this paper, which according to Bryman (2016) is the rule of good practice. The respondents agreed to participate in the interview and allowed the researcher to use the information in this project.

5.12.2. Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of the qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents (Bitsch, 2005). In the same vein, by the use of purposeful sampling and *thick description*, the researcher facilitates the transferability according to Bitsch (2005). Thick descriptive data is containing rich and extensive set of details concerning the methodology and the context of the project (Bowen, 2009). For this reason, in the project a specific target group of participants from the destination that the research took place was chosen, and the data collected was interpreted as detailed as possible. In addition, the observation was

described in a sufficient detail in order to permit the reader to see below surface appearances by offering an understanding of underlying patterns that give the information meaning (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015). Therefore, in the observation chapter it was painted a clear picture of the environment and the destination, by the use of examples, descriptions, details and quotations.

5.12.3. Dependability

Dependability involves the findings and the interpretations of the researcher, and it is established by the use of different techniques such as triangulation, comparison, replication (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, the material used in this project is easy to access, as the scripts and notes from the interviews can be find in the appendix. Also, the findings from the observation were also written down and added in the appendix, so the information collected is easy accessible for the reader.

5.12.4. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers (Bowen, 2009). Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the researcher's imagination, but are clearly derived from the data (Bowen, 2009). For this research, to stay completely objective is impossible, however the researcher tried to not allow personal values or feelings to influence the conduct of the research and the findings (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, the researcher carried out the research by trying to be objective and not letting own meaning to influence the research. However, as interpretivist paradigm and constructivism were adopted in order to interpret the data, the researcher's own values might have influence over the data.

5.12.5. Validity

There are two main requirements of any research process which are the reliability of the data and findings, and whether the research is believable and true, the validity of the research (Zohrabi, 2013). Therefore, to improve the validity of the research and the findings, triangulation as a strategy and approach was used in order to establish valid proposition and to control bias (Zohrabi, 2013). In the project, triangulation data source has been used by comparing data from observation and semi-structured interviews. However, important to acknowledge is that in tourism research it is difficult to certify validity, as the research deals with people's behavior and attitudes, which are uncontrollable responses (Smith, 2017).

5.12.6. Reliability

On the other hand, reliability refers to consistency, which means that if the research is repeated, the result has to be the same (Smith, 2017). Consequently, as this research is exploratory, and it is based on the tourists' preferences' and perceptions, it will be difficult to replicate it in another research, thus the results might be different. In the same vein according to Kvale (2007), in a humanistic themes and research, the reliability is hard and sometimes impossible to control, this is due to the uncertain and variable social conditions.

5.10. Ethics and Limitations

This chapter is important to discuss the research's potentially ethical problems and the limitations regarding the stated problem.

Ethics of a research refers to the way the research is conducted, and the set of principles applied through the research (Lomborg et al. 2014). In this research, it was important to establish an agreement with the hotel where some of the interviews took place, in regards with the ethical issues. In addition, in order not to violate any privacy issues regarding the respondents that were a subject of the study, it was deliberated upon not disclosing any personal information.

On the other hand, any research might be influenced by numerous limitations (Polonsky & Waller, 2011), as this research. In fact, while conducting the research study there were encountered some challenges and limitations. According to Wiersma (2009), the major limitation for a research might be the reliability of the study and finding the most appropriate people in this regard. Consequently, as a limitation to the research was encountered that some of the hotels that the researcher has tried to reach declined collaboration, while two hotels were willing to provide the opportunity for conducting interviews. The data collection process was also challenging, as the primary priority was to find the most relevant people to interview. Therefore, based on the sampling applied for this research, the interviews conducted are considered as the best available choices.

Another limitation was that, the research was conducted in March, however the weather was snowing and cold which was unusual for this region at this time of the year. Therefore, not that many tourists were out in the city which led to lack of useful participant observation.

For this reason, the research and data gathering continued in April, where more efficient participant observation and another number of interviews were collected.

6. Analysis

This chapter analyses the data collected on the base of theoretical and methodological literature. The aim of the analysis is to discuss the findings and to provide an answer to the problem formulation and further to the research questions:

What influences tourists' choice of a Spa destination?

- How the tourists choose a specific spa destination?
- What attributes and activities a spa destination need to possess in order to be attractive to the tourists?

6.1. Identifying themes

In order to process the collected qualitative data, patterns were identified from the scripted interviews and participant observation. During the coding the interviews were read over, and over, and key phrases were underlined as well as similarities and differences have been also discovered. Afterwards, by the use of the technique of Ryan and Bernard (2003), *repetitions*, *similarities* and *differences* have been discovered through making a comparison across the data. Thereafter, as a result of the coding the following themes were identified: **attractiveness of the destination**, **reasons for choosing this destination**, **motivations for spa**, tourists' interests, **combination of spa with other types of tourism**.

To start with the first theme which will be analyzed and discussed is the attractiveness of the destination.

6.2. Attractiveness of the destination

The destination attractiveness has two sides which are connected – the demand and supply sides. In this part of the analysis, both the demand and the supply side will be discussed, and the findings of the data will be presented. However, as first part of the destination attractiveness, the destination awareness among the respondents will be elaborated and discussed. Consequently, as second part it will be presented the demand side of the destination attractiveness, thereafter the supply side.

6.2.1. Destination awareness

Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge the tourists' destination awareness, that most of the respondents have been to the destination a few times and know about the destination since they have been children, from family, school, or internet. One might see that depending on different aspects as sources of information, the tourists have built different destination awareness and image. On the table below can be seen some of the respondent's answers regarding the destination and how and what they know about it.

Table 1. Destination awareness

Family	School	Same region	Internet
For first time about this destination, I have heard from my family. This is because my father is suffering from kidney problems and the mineral water there was helping him to recover. (Respondent 10)	I know it from school. (respondent8) I know it from my family and school (Respondent 7) I know Hisarya from school	I know about the destination because it is in the same region I live (respondent 1) It is very close to the town where I live (respondent 14)	I have read about it on the internet(respondent5) I found this destination by internet (respondent 11)

From the stated opinions above, one might argue that the destination awareness depends upon the family (if the family knows the destination and talks about it), school (the destination is a part of the studied places due to mineral water) same region, and the internet which represents other organic image sources. Moreover, important to acknowledge here is that based on those aspects the destination image has been influenced and built differently for each of the respondents. Accordingly, it can be added that the tourists' perception of the destination creates its image (Chen et al. 2010).

Thereafter, based on the destination awareness, it has been differentiated what the tourists know about the destination and the main attractions have been recognized. Consequently, they have been differentiated by the demand and supply side.

6.2.2. Demand side

The respondents have been asked what the most important and famous feature of Hisarya is, they were definitive, eight of fourteen agree that the destination is famous with its mineral water.

"I know that in Hisarya, there is thermal water that is used to heal and recover" Respondent 9.

Appendix 2.

Every person builds its own reality and view over a certain issue, in terms of this thesis the tourists share similar opinions about the destination attractiveness based on the demand side. Most of them mention that the most attractive feature of Hisarya is the **mineral water**, its mineral composition and healing effect, which can be regarded as a demand side of the destination attractiveness, since it represents the tourists' perceptions of the destination.

In terms of the theory, one might argue that the respondents perceive the destination based on cognitive image elements since it refers to the individuals' own knowledge and beliefs about the destination (Kim & Park, 2015). The cognitive destination image might be measured with several attributes such as natural beauties, cultural and historical sites, heritage, traditions, urban infrastructure, transportation facilities or tourism facilities. Whereas, in this case the mineral water represents one of the natural beauties.

“The most popular for Hisarya is the mineral water, which is highly rich on minerals.”

Respondent 11. Appendix 2.

“The most famous for Hisarya are the mineral water springs” Respondent 10. Appendix 2.

“The most popular is the history and the healing effect of the mineral water” Respondent 7.

Appendix 2.

Important to mention is that not many destinations in Bulgaria have mineral water with this type of mineral composition, therefore this represents one of the features that the town is most popular with. In fact, this feature might be regarded as demand side since the tourists construct this as a tangible resource that they expect to receive from the destination (Formica & Uysal, 2006). In the same vein, according to Illing (2014) the choice of spa destination is made by the tourists based on their willingness to improve their health, which might make the **mineral water** the main factor that attracts them to go to Hisarya and represents the demand side of the destination attractiveness. As some of the respondents mentioned that the reason to visit this particular destination is the health treatments. *“The reason to come here is because of the health treatments” respondent 12.* While he also mentioned that *“The most popular I think is the mineral water composition which helps to cure different diseases.” Respondent 12.*

In the same vein, another respondent mentioned also that “*the reason to visit is mostly health*” respondent 9. Therefore, one might argue that the mineral water might be the main or one of the main factors which influence the tourists’ choice of spa destination, since the mineral water is having its unique composition which cannot be found in other places within the country, as the same respondent mentioned:

“*And as I know the chemical composition of this water can be found only in a few mineral water springs over the world.*” Respondent 9. Appendix 2.

However, one can argue that there are many places with similar water composition over the world, but the respondent is only aware of this particular destination and has built its own cognitive and affective image. Since both are interrelated, the cognitive dimension has helped the respondent to build the affective image of this destination.

In the same vein, according to Formica (2004) one of the principal factors that influence the destination attractiveness is the natural factor. In this sense, the mineral water represents the natural factor that the destination possesses, which is also regarded as a decisive motivator for visiting the destination and the basic for its attractiveness. Accordingly, Tomic (2006) says that spa tourism destination is created by the balneological, thermal and mineral water, along with accommodation facilities, attractions and entertainment.

Nevertheless, one can argue that the health treatments and health preservation is the push factor or the tourist motivation to travel, which plays a role in the selection process of a spa destination and might be one of the factors that influences the tourists’ choice of spa destination (Klenosky, 2002). However, it can be argued that *the mineral water* as a resource can be regarded as a *pull* factor, thus not all of the tourists would be pushed by their motivation to be healthy but rather pulled by the facilities the destination provides such as recreation and spa facilities (Gillet et al. 2012).

On the other hand, as an important part of the destination attractiveness, the accessibility is also considered, in fact a few opinions from the interviews also support this statement – “*the region is easy accessible*”, “*location*”, “*it is in the middle of the country*”. Accordingly, those insights also belong to the creation of the cognitive image, as they are based on the individuals’ own beliefs and knowledge. Below some of the respondents shared:

“We have chosen it because of the location as it is in the middle of the country and it is easy accessible by all parts of the country” Respondent 2. Appendix 2.

“I chose this destination among the others because it is very easy to get here. It is in the middle of the country and the region is easy accessible. The other things that attracted me are the possibilities for entertainment and the central location of the town” Respondent 11. Appendix 2.

Important to acknowledge is that, the participants mentioned only positive opinions about the location of the destination. However, one might argue that some of the respondents might have different perceptions over this topic, but they have not mentioned them in the interview.

Nevertheless, due to the participant observation, it can be acknowledged that the destination is verily situated in the middle of the country and it is easy accessible, as there are trains and buses available almost on every hour, as well as the road is not difficult to drive on and the infrastructure is in a favorable condition.

The third attraction that most of the participants in the interview mentioned is ***the history*** and ***the roman architecture*** left within the destination. This attraction represents the demand side but in the same time also the supply side of the destination attractiveness, as it is created by the attractions that the destination provides (Formica, 2004). Moreover, one might argue that those attractions represent the pull factors of the destination, as those are tangible resources considered as a travelers' expectation of benefits (Gillet et al. 2012). Important to present are some of the opinions of the respondents who mentioned about the destination that:

“The first think that I think of is the imperators and the history about the town” Respondent 3. Appendix 2.

“The most popular for Hisarya is the history and the left ancient architecture” Respondent 1. Appendix 2.

“The fortress I think is the most popular” Respondent 2. Appendix 2.

“... other things are the roman fortress surrounding the town and the beautiful green parks” Respondent 11. Appendix 2.

Therefore, one might argue that the tourists have different point of views about what is most attractive of this spa destination. Since, most of them mention the history and the roman town

which is situated under the center of Hisarya, where can be found left roman ruins from roman baths where the “*emperators*” have been relaxing since knowing the effect of the mineral water.

Moreover, as part of the attractions that the destination provides, the respondents have mentioned the natural heritage such as parks and recreation facilities such as sport facilities. Those factors are part of the destination attractiveness; however, they will be further elaborated in the second theme as they also have influence over the choice of spa destination.

Consequently, it can be said that the demand side is based on the different tourists’ perceptions such as the history of the town and architecture, the mineral water, natural heritage as well as other recreation activities. Those perceptions are based on the process by which the respondents have selected, organized and interpreted information about this particular destination (Vogt and Andereck, 2003). According to Chen et al. (2010) those perceptions are based on the process of cognitive, affective and emotional components that helps the respondents to build their own image of the destination.

In addition, the other side of the destination attractiveness – the supply side will be discussed below.

6.2.3. Supply side

To start with, one can argue that the history of the destination has built its image as the water has been used by the romans thousands of years ago. In addition, according to Valls et al. (2014) the management of the destination is responsible for the infrastructure, the promotion of tourist attractions and the creation of facilities. Hence, one can argue that the management of Hisarya has been successfully developing and restoring the found roman ruins, which are enhancing the competitiveness of the destination and hence increasing its attractiveness. In fact, to advertise the destination different organizations, hotels and the municipality are using the left architecture to promote the town as well as its mineral water. This is because, based on the conducted participant observation a lot of ads and marketing campaigns include the fortress in their set of pictures, which can be seen in the appendix. Moreover, as I have been participating in different events in the town I have acknowledged that they have been sponsored from different hotels and the enterprise which produces the mineral water, whose marketing posters include either the fortress or the mineral water (see in appendix). Thus, accordingly Calvo et al. (2011) says that in order the destination to be more attractive, an efficient, broad and strong marketing campaign has to be established.

Consequently, one can argue that based on the desk research and the participant observation, as well as the outcome of the interviews, the marketing strategy is efficiently working, as the main factors of destination attractiveness that are considered and promoted widely are *the mineral water* and *the roman architecture*.

The relation between the components that build the destination attractiveness such as linkages, supply side and demand side have been presented and acknowledged that they are interrelated. Since, the advertisement of the destination is efficiently managed, the attractions and facilities are maintained and being developed, and the infrastructure is in favorable condition as well as transportation options are available hourly. Wherefrom, the demand side is built, and the main perceptions of the respondents are the ones promoted and maintained.

Moreover, one can argue that main pull factors might represent *the mineral water* and *the roman architecture* as well as natural heritage and other recreation facilities, thus they are some of the main attractions mentioned by the respondents. Consequently, one can argue that those factors might influence the tourist's choice of spa destination. Moreover, it can be argued that due to the composition of the mineral water and the healing effect, some of the respondents might prefer this spa destination over another, as well as the historical monuments that cannot be find in any other parts in Bulgaria. Thereafter, one can say that the spa destination has a unique character and atmosphere which *pull* the tourists to spend their spa trips there. In the same vein, according to Mohammad and Son (2010) statement a destination is perceived based on the attributes that the destination provides and the ability for the travelers to relax, gain knowledge and have excitement. Accordingly, in order to understand how they have made their choice of spa destination which can accomplish the stated above preferences, the second theme of the analysis will be discussed below.

6.3. Reasons for choosing this destination

Tourist preferences have been regarded as a critical element to explain travel behavior according to Castro (2007). Moreover, by knowing the tourists' preferences, information about their expectations and needs for taking the trip can be collected (Decrop, 2005). Therefore, for this thesis it is important to understand the respondents' preferences and inner motivations of what they want to experience as well as the reasons of choosing this destination for their spa trip.

According to the outcome of the interviews, the following key attributes for choosing this particular spa destination have been recognized within the data, which can be seen in the following frequency table.

Table 2. Frequency table

Key reasons for choosing this destination	Frequency
Accessibility	1 2 3
Attractions and history	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Nature	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Mineral water	1 2
Packages	1

Those aspects have been differentiated due to some of the key words used by the respondents in the interviews such as *“mineral water effects”, “peacefulness of the town”, “nature and parks”, “green landscape”, “fresh and clean air”, “majesty of the roman empire”, “ancient architecture”, “tennis facilities”, “packages”, “easy accessible”*.

Here it is essential to distinguished that those factors are part of the destination attractiveness and the image created from before the respondents visited the destination, since they represent the pull factors of the destination which are the travelers’ expectations of benefits and are connected to the cognitive and external aspects. However, some of the factors such as attractions and nature can create different perceptions of the destination among the respondents after the visit, depending on how their experience was and their feelings towards the destination.

One can argue that, the nature and the attractions represent some of the main reasons for visiting this particular destination, as they have been mentioned by the majority of the respondents. According to Castro (2007) the visitors can be distinguished by their behavior and visitation patterns. In the same vein, if the activity-based segmentation is used in this thesis one can argue that some of the respondents might be interested in historical and cultural attractions, other in nature, and some in sports. For example, respondent 1 says:

“I chose this destination because of the packages they offer and the attractions within the city.”

Wherefrom, one can argue that the respondents are attracted by the attractions that one might participate in and experience, as well as the affordable prices and packages which represent the pull factors of the destination. Moreover, it needs to be acknowledged that those factors are part of the supply side of the destination attractiveness and represent the attraction factors. Accordingly, the economic factors which in that case represent *“the package”*, are also important in the choice of spa destination and have influence of its attractiveness (Formica, 2004).

In the same vein, according to the following responds, the nature is one of the factors that has influenced the respondent’s choice of this spa destination.

“I chose this destination because of the green landscape and the peacefulness here.” Respondent 12. Appendix 2.

“We were attracted by the nature and the parks, and the history of the city” Respondent 9. Appendix 2.

Consequently, one might argue that those factors highlight what the travelers want to accomplish on their trip and the personal benefits they seek. Whereas, according to Nicolau & Mas (2005), these factors represent the level of interest or the level of appreciation (Lehto, 2004). Moreover, one can argue that the destination is perceived based on the attributes that it provides and the ability for the travelers to relax, gain knowledge or have excitement.

Another, interesting insight that some of the tourists mentioned is about the location of the destination. As mentioned previously in the thesis, the destination is situated in the middle of the country close to the second biggest town, which makes it a preferred spa destination, as one might see in the answers of respondent 11, who says:

“I choose this destination among the others because it is very easy to get here. It is in the middle of the country and the region is easy accessible.” Respondent 11. Appendix 2.

However, for other respondents the factors that have influence, might be connected to sport facilities:

“We come especially here because of the tennis facilities as I said, the quality of the mineral water, as there are some places where the water is not that good quality and it is not warm” Respondent 3. Appendix 2.

In fact, the respondent prefers to come to this destination mainly because of the tennis facilities that the destination provides, while in the same time to utilize the spa facilities as well. In the same vein, according to Blackwell et al. (2006) and the AIO model, the activities such as sports represent the core issue of why some of the tourists choose this particular spa destination, since the sport represent their lifestyle. In this case, the respondents' lifestyle is based on sport activities - tennis, which influence the choice of destinations, as two of the respondents also mentioned that:

“This is the only destination that provides tennis facilities and in the same time we can use the spa facilities” Respondent 3. Appendix 2.

“The reason to come here is the tennis facilities and to relax afterwards at the spa” Respondent 7. Appendix 2.

Lastly, can be said that the tourists have different preferences while choosing a spa destination, as well as different lifestyles. However, there are similarities by the preferences of natural resources and interests in historical heritage which represent the main factors influencing the selection of this destination. In addition, based on the lifestyles of some of the respondents, they have made this choice of spa destination. Moreover, one can argue that they are not interested mainly in the spa facilities but rather they have different preferences while choosing a spa destination. In addition, it can be said that the motivations for visiting spa destinations researched by many authors so far (Marvel, 2002; Mintel, 2005; Grihault, 2007) are in a contrast to the outcome of the data collected, as the outcome is not based onto the spa but the attributes and activities instead. This is because, as according also to Noveli (2006) the demand for healthy options and the growth of health consciousness have increased in people's leisure time and holidays, as it can be seen among the respondents who are looking for to relax. Hence, one can argue that it is important to understand the tourists' motivations for selecting a spa destination based on the additional attributes that have influence over their lifestyle rather solely focusing onto the spa facilities that a destination provides. Considering the stated problem formulation and the fallowing research questions, one might say that those preferences, interests and lifestyle that the respondents mentioned are the attributes and activities that a spa destination needs to possess in order to be attractive and to be chosen for a spa trip.

6.4. Motivation for spa

The third theme which is important to discuss is regarding the motivations of the tourists to visit spa destinations and to utilize spa. This is because, it is essential to know if they go to spa often or not, and if they are interested in spa at all, as the research is based on spa destinations. Previously, the reasons and motivations for going to spa have been researched by many authors (Mintel, 2005; Grihault, 2007; Mak & Wong, 2007), therefore for this thesis it will be established a comparison with the literature and the findings from the collected data, in order to gain better understanding of the spa market within the studied destination.

To start with, it will be elaborated the data about the frequency of spa visits. On the table below, it is illustrated how often the participants of the interview are going to spa.

Table 3. Frequency of spa visits

Frequency of spa visits	Respondent
Once a year	1
Twice a year	1 2
Once a month	1
Once per two months	1 2
Often	1 2 3 4 5 6
Don't go to spa	1 2

By identifying the patterns and similarities within the data, it was recognized that most of the respondents have been going to spa *often*, which definition can be seen in a few of the responses:

“I go to spa very often. When I choose a hotel in a specific destination, I look at the hotel and spa services and facilities that are provided. I also look at the location of the hotel, as I adore spa hotels which are surrounded by nature...” Respondent 10. Appendix 2

“I often go to spa and prefer to be clean there” Respondent 3. Appendix 2

“I go to spa 5 to 20 times a year” Respondent 13. Appendix 2.

However, there were two of the respondents who mentioned that they are not really interested in spa.

“I don’t really go to spa” Respondent 2. Appendix 2.

“I am not really interested in spa” Respondent 4. Appendix 2.

Wherefrom, can be said that 12 of the respondents in the interview are going to spa. In the same vein, most of them have been to the destination, while others have been there for first time.

However, by considering the motivation for going to spa, it is essential to mention the following reasons that have been found within the collected data: ***thermal water, health treatments, health, relaxation, peace, relief, escape from daily routines***. In fact, according to the research by Mak and Wong (2007) about tourists’ motivations for spa which have been distinguished into “*relaxation and relief*”, “*escape*”, “*self-reward*”, “*indulgence*” and “*health and beauty*”, one can say that the motivations for spa are similar compared to those found in the interviews.

In addition, a few of the respondents mentioned the health treatments and health reasons, whereas according to Smith and Kelly (2006), some of the spa tourists are healthy people which primary aim for their trip is to preserve their health. This can be seen in the reply of respondent 1:

“I came here for relaxation and for the healing power of the water, but mostly for the water treatments.” Respondent 1. Appendix 2.

As well as respondents 9 and 12 who say that:

“The reason to visit is mostly health”. Respondent 9. Appendix 2.

“The reason to come here is because of health treatments” Respondent 12. Appendix 2

In fact, one can argue that these tourists are active health seekers, who utilize spa for enriching optimal health (Myers et al.,2005). Here, one can argue that those respondents have chosen this destination mainly because of the health treatments and due to the motive of regeneration.

In the same vein, the other types of motivations are due to the stressful lifestyles and the need to escape from the daily routines, as a few of the respondents say:

“Relax and relief, escape from the daily routine” Respondent 8. Appendix 2.

Whereas according to Novelli (2006), the demand for healthy lifestyle have increased, wherefrom one can see that the respondents are mostly looking for escape and trying to relax due to stressful routine, while there are also benefit seekers who want to get relief and enjoy the peacefulness of the town.

Thereafter, it can be said that the respondents have different motivations for spa which are affected due to their lifestyle, health and other personal and inner needs that one strives to accomplish. However, for the purpose of this thesis it is important to elaborate how and why those tourists are attracted by the studied destination and what are the main aspects that the respondents look for to experience.

Therefore, in the next theme it will be elaborated the types of interests the respondents have, as on this way clear view and better understanding of their motivations for choosing this specific destination will be elaborated and further discussed.

6.5. Tourists' interests

This theme about tourists' interests is regarded to be important for this thesis, since it will provide with better understanding of what the tourists would like to experience within the destination, rather than thermal procedures and spa facilities. This is because, this information will contribute and support the analysis with insights over the stated problem formulation and will help to answer the research question:

What attributes and activities a spa destination need to possess in order to be attractive to the tourists?

Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge that nine of the respondents mentioned that the healthy lifestyle and sports are part of their interests. Moreover, they share the opinion that they have been training while being here and participating in different sports activities.

“We played tennis and we also ride bicycles... I am very much interested in the healthy lifestyle therefore we train a lot.” Respondent 3. Appendix 2.

“We were cycling in the city as there are nice and new bicycle alleys” Respondent 11.

Appendix 2

“I am interested only in dances and I went for some folklore dances here” Respondent 14.

Appendix 2.

In addition to that, based on the participant observation can be added that in fact there are new bicycle alleys surrounding the old town where I have met few people riding a bicycle which can be seen in the attached pictures, as well as the event about the folklore dances.

According to the healthy lifestyle, 4 of the respondents share that for them healthy lifestyle is: “try to eat healthy and to train” Respondent 10.; “I am interested in the healthy lifestyle, therefore we train a lot” respondent 3; “I practice yoga, but here I would try cycling and the horse riding, I also try to live healthy and eat healthy” respondent 6. “Spinning...I am interested in healthy lifestyle... I do not have the time to eat healthy” respondent 8.

Wherefrom, one can argue that those respondents interested in healthy lifestyle, distinguished it as based on the healthy nutrition and the physical activity.

In fact, one of the lifestyle dimensions of the AIO model is regarding the sports, those are the activities by which the tourists might choose a specific spa destination according to Chen et al. (2010). Therefore, one might argue that based mainly on the sport interests, some of the tourists may choose the spa destination for their trip. While others had different interests such as ancient history, culture and nature, as one can see in the response of respondent 5:

“I have visited the famous Kamilite (fortress gate), and the roman baths and tomb, I walked around the fortress and it is very peaceful.” Respondent 5. Appendix 2.

However, the tourists mentioned many other interests and places they want to visit and experience, which cannot be seen in any other place in Bulgaria. Therefore, one might argue that those historical places are part of the tourists’ preferences of a spa destination and might be the reason to visit it.

Information was also collected of other activities and things which the respondents want to experience at the destination such as: **wine degustation, horse riding, excursion in the forests, concerts and theaters, rest of the parks, other historical places** (see in appendix 2). According

to the literature, there is no research made based on additional attributes and activities and such interests have not been identified before. Whereas, one can argue that those interests are part of the selection process of a spa destination and have influence over the choice of one. Therefore, can be argued that this additional information and knowledge about the tourists' interests are important factors which need to be further researched in order to have an understanding of the tourists' motivations and choice of specific spa destination. Moreover, one can argue that the motivation for "escape" which is also distinguished by Mak and Wong (2007) can represent also those additional activities, since by visiting historical places and walking in the rest of the parks the tourists will "escape" from their daily life and routine, as well as they will "relax" and gain "relief".

Lastly, it can be said that in order a spa destination to be attractive different attributes need to be available such as nature, parks, sports activities and historical places, where the tourists can spend their spare time after the spa treatments. Moreover, as many attributes a destination possess as attractive it will be, while considering the respondents' interests and the activities that they want to participate in. Nevertheless, important to acknowledge is that none of the respondents is mentioning different spa procedures or facilities as interests, but rather focusing on the attributes that the destination provides. In the same vein, according to the literature researches made so far, they are only based on the spa facilities, treatments and the outcome of it – longevity treatments, personal relaxation, tranquility and beauty (Marvel, 2002; Mintel, 2005; Grihault, 2007). Whereas, one can see the contrast in the findings which leads to the emerging need of establishing different researches over the tourists' motivations for spa, interests in the additional attributes and their influence over the choice of specific destination. Consequently, this study contributes to the literature since it offers different and new insights over the motivations over the choice of spa destination. Hence, one might say that while considering a spa destination for their trip, the respondents have been looking at what else to experience within the spa destination depending on their interests and preferences, rather than solely based on spa and spa facilities.

Consequently, based on the additional tourists' interests it has been established the following theme about the combination of spa with other types of tourism, as clear opinions about such combinations have been mentioned by the respondents.

6.6. Combination of spa with other types of tourism

The last theme of the analysis is regarding the combination of various types of tourism that the respondents of the interview have mentioned as a part of their spa trips. This theme is important for this thesis, as it gives real time opinions which brings information closely connected to the problem formulation. Moreover, by having that data, analysis and discussion over the problem statement can be established which will further give an answer to the research questions.

In this sense, according to Personen et al. (2011) there are different segments of wellbeing tourists depending on the benefits they seek, those are outdoor type, nature enthusiasts, sightseers and culture tourists. Regarding the data collected from the interviews, one can argue that those types of tourists can be seen among the respondents. This is because, similarities in their opinions have recognized some of the following key worlds: *sports, walk in forest, sightseeing, cultural tourism, historical places*. Thus, one can argue that those types of interests or tourism, are similar to the ones that Personen et al. (2011) have differentiated, as the respondents are wellness tourists visiting a spa destination. Therefore, it can be argued that the spa tourists are interested in different types of tourism while being on their spa holiday. As a comment to that, Strategy for sustainable tourism development in Bulgaria (2014) has identified that 48% from the tourists utilizing spa are looking for an additional type of tourism, while 27% are looking for two additional types of tourism within the chosen destination. Whereas, according to the outcome of the interviews, the majority of the respondents belong to the ones who look for more than one type of additional tourism. This can be seen in the following answers:

“Yes, I prefer to combine my spa holiday with other useful activities, such as walk in the forest, sightseeing of historical places and wine tasting.” Respondent 10. Appendix 2.

“I combine it with different types of tourism such as cultural and wine tourism” Respondent 13. Appendix 2.

“Yes, I combine it with sport and historical tourism” Respondent 7. Appendix 2.

In this sense, according to Urh (2015) the spa goers are also interested in health-related activities such as participation in sports, health treatment and positive use of leisure time. Consequently, one

can argue that the participants of the interview are trying to stay healthy and happy, since by engaging in relaxing activities happiness is created (Koncul, 2012), which might represent one of the reasons to choose a particular spa destination.

“Yes I do, historical tourism, wine tourism maybe, relax with aim to gain some new knowledge.”

Respondent 8. Appendix 2.

From this comment, one can argue that in order the tourists to visit a particular spa destination, the arrangements of the tourist area are necessary such as parks, walking trails, places for relaxation and leisure (Milovanovic, 2012). In the same vein, Klenosky (2002) argues that the selection of a spa destination is based on the desires of the tourists and the attributes of the destination which might fulfill the tourists' expectations – *the pull factors*. Consequently, it can be said that in order to fulfill the tourists' preferences and needs a spa destination needs to be managed efficiently by bundling the resources that the destination possess (Kozak, 2004). Whereas, one can argue that the respondents of the interview might be interested not only in the spa and mineral water that the destination provides, but rather spend their leisure time visiting historical places, doing sports, relaxing in the parks, which might represent the additional attributes by which they choose a specific spa destination.

“I usually would combine the spa with sport and also visit some historical places” Respondent 6.

Appendix 2.

Moreover, while doing the participant observation it is important to supplement that many tourists have been walking in the parks, taking pictures at the historical places, cycling around the fortress and in the parks, as well as jogging. In fact, while I was participating in different events, there were people from many different parts of Bulgaria, which have been “pulled” by the events, however on this way they also have probably spend time in the hotels and using the spa facilities. Nevertheless, by being advertised on this way they have gain knowledge about the destination and created cognitive and affective image of the destination, which might be bring them as a spa tourists next time. Since according to Sirakaya and Woodside (2012), the marketing information represents a crucial component that provide the tourists with information about the destination. One might argue, that the participants of those events will represent an efficient marketing trigger, as they will represent the world of mouth (WOF) marketing. Thereafter, can be said that by the combination of different types of tourism and activities that the tourists are interested in, the spa

destination might be more attractive than one that is barely advertised by the use of such events, competitions and the media as well (Calvo et al. 2011).

To conclude this chapter, one can argue that the combination of tourism related activities and spa are part of the tourists' expectations and needs, while being in a spa destination. Moreover, those other types of tourism might represent the reason to select one spa destination over another. Whereas, considering the problem formulation, one can say that the tourists' choice is influenced by the attributes that the spa destination provides rather than solely based onto the spa facilities.

7. Conclusion

This thesis is based on the research about the choice of spa destination and the attributes that makes it attractive. For this reason, destination as a study case was chosen where interviews and participant observation have been conducted. The purpose of those actions, were to collect data about the preferences, motivations and perceptions of a specific age group of tourists (between 30 and 50 years old) visiting this particular spa destination, in order to give suggestions for answering the problem formulation and the following research questions: ***What influences tourists' choice of a Spa destination?*** How the tourists choose a specific spa destination? What attributes and activities a spa destination need to possess in order to be attractive to the tourists?

Therefore, based on the methodology and literature used within this thesis, an analysis has been established, which purpose was to give suggestions and possible answers to the stated questions. Thereafter, based on the analysis, it can be said that different aspects and factors have influence over the tourists' choice of spa destination. Those aspects are based onto the tourists' preferences and interests such as sightseeing, historical places and attractions, different sports, natural heritage. Consequently, it can be argued that those additional attributes have a significant importance in the selection of a spa destination, since those attributes and activities that can be experienced within the studied destination were the main subjects mentioned by the respondents. In fact, the majority of the answers have been based onto the additional attributes that the destination possesses, rather than the variety of spa facilities. Whereas, can be argued that those additional attributes represent the attractiveness of the spa destination and have influence over the choice of it.

Moreover, based on the analysis for the combination of different types of tourism can be said that the respondents are interested to try different things, while being at the spa destination. Since, they want to *gain new knowledge, learn more about the history of the places, experience different sports and participate in competitions.*

However, important to mention here is that as influencing factor over the choice of spa destination can be regarded also the mineral water due to its unique composition. This is because, the composition of the mineral water in Hisarya, has unique chemical composition and it is highly rich on minerals, which makes it preferred destination by the tourists who are interested in healthy lifestyle and others who want to relax and gain relief.

Consequently, it can be said that a final and concrete answer cannot be given to the problem formulation, as there are different factors that influence the choice of a spa destination and which makes it attractive. However, important to acknowledge is that, while this age group of tourists have made the choice of a spa destination they have been looking at the additional attributes that the destination provides, which meet their needs, interests and expectations, rather based solely onto the spa facilities available at the destination. Lastly, the outcome of this thesis may contribute to the literature and might be used to fill in a knowledge gap regarding the selection of spa destinations.

8. Further research

In order to gain more knowledge and understanding of the tourist's motivations and preferences for choosing specific spa destination the research can be continued by making a comparison between two spa destinations within the country. On this way information about both destinations can be collected and interviews can be conducted among the tourists. Wherefrom, analysis over both types of tourists can be established, hence it can be elaborated what are the preferences of the spa goers to the first destination and the preferences to the ones going to the second destination. By doing that different information regarding the tourists' preferences will be collected and can

be further used in the literature in order to fill in a knowledge gap as well as it might be regarded as more reliable and can be used to be compared with future researches about this topic.

Moreover, the present research was focused on a specific age group of tourists – 30s to 50s, however as another perspective following this project, research based on different age group can be considered. This is because, other preferences and motivations for the selection of a spa destination might be discovered, which might bring more knowledge and insights to the literature regarding different age groups.

Appendix 1.

Semi structured interview – questions.

1. Is this your first visit to this spa destination? If not, how many times have you visited?
2. Where did you hear about this spa destination?
3. What is the reason behind your visit?
4. How and why did you choose Hisarya for your holiday? What do you know about it?
5. What other types of tourism would you combine while going on spa trips?
6. What other attractions interests/attracted you in this spa destination?
7. What do you think is the most attractive feature of Hisarya?
8. Did you or are you going to play some sports or visit some places\events within the destination? What and why?
9. What else would you like to experience in this spa destination?

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