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The Wellness Industry: From Therapy to Hedonism

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"Time and Silence are the most luxurious things today." Tom Ford

Introduction

Bathing in thermal waters, massages, beauty treatments, alternative medicine – the spectrum of products and services offered by the wellness industry is large, as outlined in this book. Boundaries between self-indulgence and therapeutic necessity are blurred. The intention of this chapter is to further the debate on the conceptualisation of classifications of wellness products and services offered by the industry. The aim is to provide insights into the broad variety of products and services offered by the wellness sector, catering for market specifics from products, including medical elements to products that include elements of hedonism. To enable the visualisation of such a scale, wellness products have been placed within a spectrum to allow a differentiation of products that cater for medical wellbeing in comparison to offerings that cater for the decadence of pampering and luxury. The chapter discusses the broader lines of providing remedies and cures in comparison to services which have no scientifically proven or at least questionable impacts on the physical health of guests, in an industry that faces increasing competition, forcing further product segmentation and development.

Why do people choose wellness services?

The reasons for choosing wellness services are as multifaceted as their consumers: from people trying to revitalise, maintain their beauty, escape from their daily lives, treat themselves to something extraordinary, to the ones who want to work on their well-being holistically, but also those who have aches and pains up to serious illnesses. In a postmodern society the categories can be kaleidoscopic, meaning that they can merge and change for each person also during time, and are partially influenced by their sociocultural environment. Imagine winning the lottery, would you treat yourself to more extravagant forms of wellness?

Unfortunately not everybody can win the lottery but many people still want the special treatments offered by the industry, so we might take what our time and budgets allow us. This implies that there must be added levels of luxury in the spectrum of wellness products and services. Furthermore one might suggest that if the economic situation of an individual allows it, there may be increased levels of hedonism as well as enhanced forms of treatments when being treated in health related issues. So what does the term hedonism actually imply? As there are varying definitions of hedonism we would like to go with Veenhoven's (2003:437) definition: "for a way of life in which pleasure plays an important role. Hedonists are people who are positive about pleasure and who pluck the fruits of pleasure when possible."

Also interesting is the concept of hedonism by Crisp (2006: 620-621)

'It is not psychological hedonism, the view that human action or perhaps rational and deliberate human action is motivated by a concern for the greatest expected balance of pleasure over pain. Nor is it a view about morality, such as hedonistic utilitarianism, according to which the right thing to do is maximize impartially the balance of pleasure over pain. Nor is it a view about the good, since the kind of hedonism I have in mind is consistent with the view that there are non-hedonist values, such as aesthetic values. Nor is it a view about what makes for a good life, or a good human life. Nor, even, is it a view about happiness, which may well be understood most plausibly in a non-hedonistic way. Rather, I wish to discuss hedonism as a theory of well-being, that is, of what is ultimately good for any individual.'

Thereby, socio-cultural understanding plays an important role in how the individual defines what is ultimately good for them.

Despite several scholars having argued that spa visitation caters to 'hedonistic sybarites' (Dann and Nordstrand, 2009: 127) or suggesting that spa visitors are focused on the "superficial quest for merely feeling 'well' rather than on 'true' well-being" (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006: 12) or describing spiritual retreat visitors as pursuing more meaningful and worthy experiences, portraying them as the 'true' wellness tourists (Smith, 2003; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006), Voigt *et al.* (2010) in their study on hedonic and eudaimonic experiences of wellness tourists suggest that from a positive well-being point of view, it is "too simplistic to view

hedonic tourism experiences as shallow, or to equate spa visitors with unhealthful, overindulgent individuals who seek meaningless pleasures“. Hedonic well-being or positive affect should not be regarded as unsubstantial, meaningless, or even destructive and that “the lines between hedonic pleasure and more ‘meaningful pursuits’ should not be drawn too rigidly“ (King *et al.*, 2006: 191). Instead they note that positive psychologists regard hedonic and eudaimonic well-being as equally important in achieving a state of optimal positive psychological well-being.

Society increasingly recognises the importance of experiential leisure and the significance of the pause, furthering the understanding of leisure as a state of mind, perceived freedom vs. relative freedom, intrinsic motivation and self-determination in leisure. Within contemporary society there are numerous reasons for seeking soothing, calming environments and escapism from the daily routine, with terms like work-life balance, burnout syndrome and depression becoming increasingly important in the work environment. Depression and anxiety are the most prevalent global mental disorders, with an estimated 350 million people of all ages being affected (WHO, 2016) The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that by 2020 depression alone will be the most prevalent single cause of disability in both the developed and the developing world, affecting more woman than men (Lopez *et al.*, 2006; WHO, 2016).

As a remedy, the role of well-being/wellness in improving mental health is of increasing interest, not only to the spa and wellness industry, but also to psychologists and medical sciences. More than 30 years ago, Butler and Wall (1985) suggested that potential relationships exist between tourism and mental as well as physical health, stating the need for more explicit attention.

Aside from improving mental health, wellness can be regarded as a holistic approach to improving well-being. Within a public health framework, the activities that can improve health include the promotion of health, the prevention of illness and disability, and the treatment and rehabilitation of those affected. These are different from one another, even though the actions and outcomes overlap. They are all required, are complementary, and no one is a substitute for the other (Herrman *et al.*, 2005: 6). As categories overlap and merge together, it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate the variety of wellness services and offerings available from the industry, possibly due to the fact that the World Health Organisation since 1946 has followed a more holistic approach to define health as physical, psychological and social well-being, signalling the move away from purely treating illnesses towards increasing the well-being of each individual.

Competition in the market is also increasing, and similarly to other service industries new niches are created and established thereby diversifying the wellness market. Within the spa industry, the definitions of the terms wellness and health are inconsistent and they vary significantly as well as being used interchangeably, even though they often describe different concepts.