

## Research Article

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# Modeling spa destination choice for leveraging hydrogeothermal potentials in Serbia

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**Abstract:** Serbian spas, with their abundant geothermal springs and air qualities, are a significant natural resource for the country. Nowadays, tourism industry has become a predominant beneficiary attracting both leisure- and health-related visits. Nonetheless, the literature on current consumer behavior is devoid of a model that incorporates both motivating and constraining factors in the spa and wellness industry's decision-making process. Serbia's spa industry is still adjusting to the needs of the modern wellness visitor as a result of the country's unique transitional path. The purpose of this study is to ascertain the role of incentive and restrictions in the destination selection process of spa visitors in Serbia, to gain insight into the development of wellness tourism in a particular sociocultural environment. The analytical hierarchy process was used to determine the relative relevance of the consumer behavior elements evaluated. The findings indicate that non-medical motivations are becoming more important, implying that demand is finally shifting toward the wellness idea, which was initially disrupted by the country's delayed transformation. The findings have administrative ramifications, the most significant of which were price strategies and product diversification.

**Keywords:** spa tourism, wellness tourism, motivation, constraints, transition

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## 1 Introduction

Exceptional hydrogeothermal potential that can be found in Serbia is an important natural resource for the country [1,2]. This has been utilized for many centuries, all the way to the present day, when tourism has become the primary benefactor. Geothermal springs, which have combined their attractiveness with good air quality and man-made attractions [3,4] to create popular spa and wellness facilities, draw increasing number of both leisure-related and health-related visitors. In general, spas are recognized as places devoted to overall wellbeing of people by offering a variety of treatments and services that encourage the renewal of mind, body, and spirit [5]. Wellness has become a common notion in society, used often by the media and marketers to emphasize tasteful, up-to-date, and stylish products [6,7]. In Central and Eastern Europe, until the collapse of state socialism or communism, thermal bath visits and therapies were seen as both a reward for workers and a way of increasing their productivity. However, in recent years, some spas are being re-invented as wellness rather than medical destinations.

The spa and wellness market is quite fragmented, whereby every segment provides services for consumers' various needs, which are constantly evolving in accordance with social and lifestyle changes. Wellness tourism has traditionally been linked to spa tourism experiences [8]. The concept of wellness has a history rooted in therapy and healing as well as medicinal, spiritual, and religious connotations [7]. Spas face the challenge of changing the following perceptions – that they are focused only on medical services and that they attract primarily clients which are more interested in a healthy lifestyle [9]. Understanding consumer behavior, both its motivating and constraining aspects, is of great interest for the destination marketers, allowing them to adjust for various segments of the demand. To adequately develop the spa experience for tourists in different countries, a cross-cultural perspective is advised in research of spa tourists' behavior [10].

Motives for traveling to spa destinations are heterogeneous [11,12], whereby primary motivation of visitors to individual spas contributes to the differentiation between medical, therapeutic, and wellness tourism destinations [13]. The role of motivation in spa and wellness tourism has recently been extensively researched, whether with focus on its push [13–18], pull [19,20], or both dimensions [10,21], whereby pull factors received less attention [21].

Mak et al. [22] explored push motivation of Hong Kong spa goers. The relaxation and relief factor, was established as the most important, followed by the escape factor. Insight into wellness motivation of Americans was provided by Koh et al. [17]. They extracted the following push dimensions – social, relaxation, health, and rejuvenation, whereby relaxation was pointed out as the most important, followed by rejuvenation. Kamata and Misui [15] conducted a segmentation of Japanese spa visitors based on their push motivation and established that the soothing qualities factor was the most dominant. Kim et al. [16] conducted a study of Taiwan wellness tourism. Self-development was established as the most important, followed by relaxation and escape. Recent studies focused on push motivation in European spa and wellness tourism were conducted by Dimitrovski and Todorović [14] and Dryglas and Salamaga [13]. The latter study comprised a segmentation of tourists in traditional Polish spa destinations based on their motives. Therapeutic motives were established as the most important, followed by preventive healthcare and leisure motives. The only research focused on motivation of wellness tourists in Serbia is the one presented by Dimitrovski and Todorović [14]. They explored push motivation of visitors of Vrnjačka spa and extracted the following dimensions – rejuvenation, socialization and excitement, hedonism, obsession with health and beauty, relaxation, and escape. Rejuvenation was established as “a central motivational aspect among wellness tourists in spas” (p. 262). In addition, relaxation and socialization were pointed out as the primary motives.

Chen et al. [10] studied motivation of wellness resort visitors in Taiwan. They made no clear distinction between push and pull motives. Relaxation, pursuit of multiple activities, recreation, and experiencing the nature were established as the dominant motives. Another study that comprised both push and pull motives was conducted by Konu and Laukannen [21], who explored motivation of potential wellbeing tourists in Finland. They established that refreshment was the push item with the largest effect on the behavioral intentions, while existence of a water park or a spa and natural sights were the most influential pull items.

When it comes to pull motives, Lee et al. [19] explored the perceived importance of various destination attributes for the overall attractiveness of Taiwan as a hot springs’ tourism destination. They identified the safety and security dimension as the most important for the visitors, followed by the natural resources and accommodation dimensions. Another case study from East Asia was conducted by Kucukusta and Denizci Guillet [23], who explored importance of five attributes for the preference of past spa visitors in Hong Kong. Therapist qualifications, prices, and privacy level were reported to be the most important attributes. Focused on pull motives in spa tourism of Thailand, the study by Han et al. [24] identified treatment quality, variety of service options, and price as the most important attributes affecting the wellness spa performance. When it comes to Europe, a study by Pesonen et al. [20] was focused on pull motives of potential wellbeing tourists in Finland. Natural features (lakes, landscape, and clean environment) were established as the most valued benefits, while high hygiene level, sauna services, and healthy food were pointed out as the most important holiday attributes. Numerous studies focused on natural resources and protected areas as pull motives for spa and wellness tourists. Arguably, thermo-mineral springs with healing properties [25] are the most important natural resource for spa tourism. Natural areas are also regarded as parts of therapeutic landscapes [26], complementing the offer based on the springs.

Spa tourists with different cultural backgrounds usually have different motivations for visiting spas and also perceive them differently [22]. While Europeans use spa services for their curative qualities, Americans see them as a reward for hard work and Hongkongers’ motivation comprises both self-reward and health motives. These differences indicate the need for further research of spa tourism motivation in different socio-cultural contexts.

The majority of constraint research in tourism uses the hierarchical leisure constraint model, introduced by Raymore et al. [27] and expanded by Crawford et al. [28] and Jackson et al. [29]. Constraints consist of three dimensions – intrapersonal, intrapersonal, and structural, which was confirmed by numerous studies [12,27,30,31]. Intrapersonal constraints are defined as psychological states and personal characteristics that interact with an individual’s preferences, such as anxiety and self-perceived skills. Interpersonal constraints comprise various circumstances related to an individual’s social relationships, such as inability to find a partner for a trip. Structural dimension consists of constraints that interfere between preferences for a certain activity and participation in it.

There are three subdimensions within the structural constraints – place attributes (e.g. distance or crowdedness), lack of time and money [32]. To the best of our knowledge, constraints for spa and wellness tourism, which represent another important element of tourist behavior, have not been subject of previous research, particularly not one focused on broader spectrum of constraints by using an integral constraint framework, such as the hierarchical leisure constraint model [28].

The aim of this article is to provide insight into consumer behavior of spa and wellness tourists in a specific socio-cultural context – a country with both delayed and prolonged transitional processes, whose spa destinations endure yet another form of transition, that being their transformation from traditional spa to modern wellness centers.

## 2 Study area

Serbia is often regarded as a “country of spas,” because of its 300 thermo-mineral springs in a relatively small area of 88,361 km<sup>2</sup>, long tradition of their utilization and their significance for the tourism economy. Abundance, diversity, distribution, and chemical composition of thermo-mineral waters in Serbia are all results of complex geological past. This is represented by rocks from different periods and ways of formation, mineralogical and petrological characteristics. There are six large tectonic regions in Serbia – Interior Dinarides, Šumadija-Kopaonik-Kosovo Massif, Serbian-Macedonian Massif, Carpatho-Balkanides, Dacian Basin, and Pannonian Basin. Relief of Serbia decreases from south to north, with an average altitude of 473 m. The vast majority of thermo-mineral springs are located south of Sava and Danube rivers, in the mountainous parts of the country (Figure 1). Spas are located at various altitudes, ranging from Lukovska spa at the Kopaonik Mountain (681 m) to Rusanda spa in the Pannonian Basin (82 m). Serbian spas display hydrological diversity in regard to the chemical composition of water (alkaline, alkaline-muriatic, muriatic, muriatic-carbonate, ferrous, sulfurous, iodine, and radioactive [33]) and its temperatures. The waters of Vranjska spa are among the hottest in Europe with temperatures going as high as 100°C [34]. Spas of Serbia are characterized by a temperate continental climate with site-specific microclimatic conditions caused by being located in valleys or on mountain sides, as well as being surrounded by forests (for example, Prolom spa in the Radan Nature Park or

Vrdnik spa in the Fruška Gora National Park). Utilization of springs dates back to the Neolithic [35] was elevated by the Romans (e.g. Gamzigradska spa near the Felix Romuliana UNESCO site), used through the Middle Ages and during the ottoman rule from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries [36]. The first initiatives related to some form of modern spa tourism in Serbia happened in the nineteenth century. This was helped by the studies of the prominent Austrian physician Emmerich Lindenmeier, who was in charge of health services. Only at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, from numerous “folk spas,” real spas emerged, which were hygienically improved and had their water medically tested. After the First World War, magnificent villas and parks were built in the spas, inspired by the French and Italian ones, as well as summer houses and salons. The period after the Second World War was characterized by a sudden and rapid growth of spa tourism. Accommodation facilities and health resorts were built and spas were increasingly established as places for recovery [37]. Spas in Serbia continued to develop, leading to records in visits, overnight stays, and economic effects in the 1980s.

Demand for wellness services in other countries has started to increase in the 1990s [38], which coincided with the start of transition in Serbia. The combination of political (disintegration of Yugoslavia and subsequent wars) and related economic factors (international sanctions) led to a massive economic crisis, which caused the tourism market to plummet. It also delayed the transition process. Focus on the goals in the political economy dimension and neglect of social, cultural, psychological, and environmental aspects have characterized transition processes in Europe [39] and Serbia was not an exception. The privatization process was being poorly conducted and combined with the high degree of neglect and decay of spa facilities, as a result of decades long absence of investments, brought many spas to the edge of existence (e.g. Mataruška and Bogutovačka spa), while some were completely shut down (Zvonačka spa).

It must be noted that many post-communist tourism economies faced the issues of inadequate infrastructure, poor image, management and accommodation, lack of built attraction and entertainment facilities, low service standard, and a depressed economy [40]. However, overcoming of these obstacles, adaptation of Serbian spas to new trends, including wellness, and country’s transition in general were seriously interrupted by these turbulent events, marking Serbia’s distinctive transitional path [39] and distinguishing it from Slovakia, Hungary and

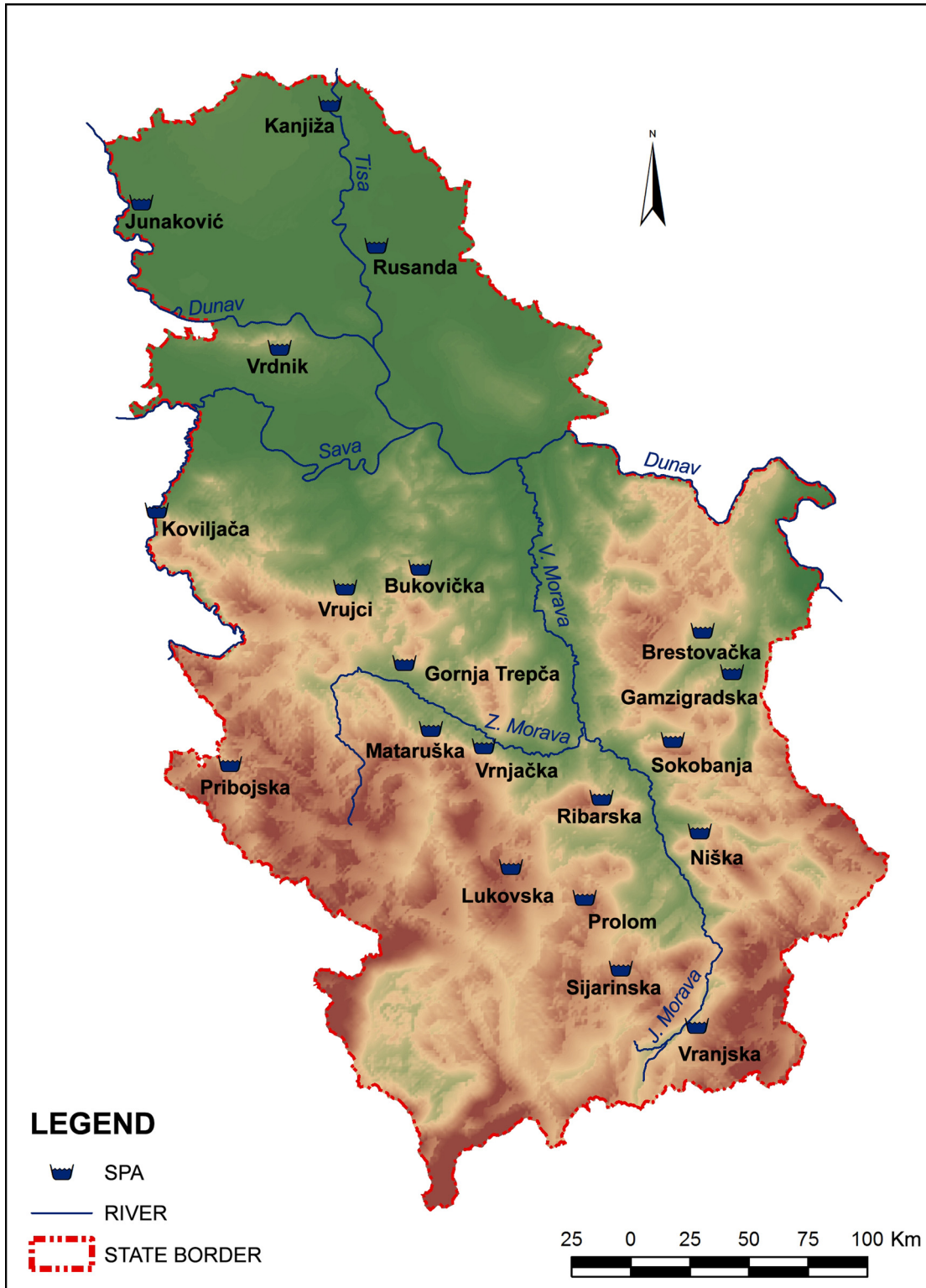


Figure 1: Map of Serbia.

Slovenia, which dealt with the changes in demand successfully [41]. While in many European countries the reduction of subsidies for medical spas in combination with the growing desire for a healthier way of life caused

an increase in the share of commercial stays in the overall visitor numbers [13], similar development in Serbia combined with other inhibiting factors, and left negative economic consequences.

In the first years of the twenty-first century, spa tourism started to make some progress, but at a slower pace than the country's mountain and city tourism [42]. Since 2006, some spas in Serbia have improved their business strategies and started introducing innovations and additional services in their health tourism offer, based on which they made progress in the tourist market [43]. Accordingly, there have been particularly positive trends after 2010 (Table 1), especially in the more prominent spa centers. It should be noted that the top 20 spa resorts account for 95% of the total turnover of Serbian spas. Some of them represent good examples of a successfully managed privatization, others improved their offer while staying publicly owned, while in some of them completely new private investments occurred. Integral promotion of the growing number of wellness destinations and businesses is carried out by the Health, Wellness and spa Tourism Cluster of Serbia.

### 3 Methodology

The analytic hierarchy process (AHP) is a systematic approach developed by Saaty [44] and it is used to construct an evaluation model for decision-making, using weighted criteria. It integrates different measures into a single overall score for ranking decision alternatives [45]. The goal is placed at the top of the hierarchy, while the criteria, sub-criteria, and alternatives are on successive levels and sublevels of the hierarchy.

AHP can assist decision-making research in tourism, especially where this involves assessing a large number of decision factors and can measure the importance of each factor influencing the decision. AHP, in so doing, provides a hierarchy of factors according to their importance, which helps managers and other stakeholders make decisions [46]. The AHP method has quite recently

found its application as a tool in the tourism field [47–49]. When the hierarchical model of the problem is established, the tourists can compare the elements in pairs at each level of the hierarchy with the element in the higher level of the hierarchy. For tourists, the criterion weights represent a measure of the relative importance of the elements [50].

The first phase of the research included a review of the existing literature and the selection of all factors and limitations that affect travel and thus the choice of tourist destination. Based on the literature review [22,51], factors influencing the decision-making process were adapted and divided into three main groups: individual motivation or personal factors (push factors), then destination characteristics (pull factors), and situational inhibitors or constraints.

The survey was conducted as follows: respondents were asked to assign appropriate numerical values to each factor (internal, external, and constraints) using the Saaty scale, with the goal of assigning a degree of importance. After assessing all the factors at level 2, they moved on to level 3 and, with the help of a mutual comparison of factors within the same level of the hierarchy, assessed the relative importance. Then, they moved on to level 4, using the same method.

#### 3.1 Research sample

After selecting the items and designing the questionnaire, a visitor survey was conducted in five spa destinations with wellness offer (Vrnjačka, Prolom, Lukovska, Ribarska and Bukovička spa). The final sample included 35 respondents, of different ages, genders and levels of education. AHP is a rather subjective method which does not require a large sample, and it is useful for research focusing on a specific issue where a large sample is either difficult to attain or is not mandatory [52,53]. Cheng and Li [52] argue that the AHP method, in fact, made impractical in surveys with a large sample size as “cold-called,” non-expert, respondents may have a great tendency to provide arbitrary answers, resulting in a very high degree of inconsistency, which invalidates the approach [54]. The sampling strategy for the AHP method can be based on a suitably chosen purposive sample that is appropriate for generating qualitative data, which is useful for research focusing on a specific issue where a large sample is not necessary, especially in tightly bounded case studies [52,53]. A purposive sampling strategy was deemed appropriate for this research because of the limited need for generalization from the case study [55].

**Table 1:** Tourist turnover in Serbian spas

	<b>Tourist arrivals</b>	<b>% of overall arrivals in Serbia</b>	<b>Overnight stays</b>	<b>% of overall overnight stays in Serbia</b>
2000	330,054	15.2	2,509,702	32.6
2005	302,689	15.2	2,012,318	30.9
2010	344,967	17.2	2,210,710	34.4
2015	427,456	17.5	1,854,582	27.9
2019	670,044	18.2	2,781,627	27.6

Source: Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia 2019 (2020).

### 3.2 Data

The obtained data were subsequently entered into the statistical program “Expert Choice 2000.” This program was created by Saaty and Forman in 1983 for the specific purpose of analysis of AHP. The last phase included determining the consistency ratio (CR) of the entire study, as well as the final ranking of the factors with the help of determining the weighting coefficients. If the CR is less than 0.10, the result is sufficiently accurate and there is no need for adjustments in comparison or for repeating the calculation. If the ratio of consistency is greater than 0.10, the results should be re-analysed to determine the reasons for inconsistencies, to remove them by partial repetition of the pairwise comparison, and if repeating the procedure in several steps do not lead to the reduction of the consistency to the tolerable limit of 0.10, all results should be discarded and the whole procedure should be repeated from the beginning [50]. As the feedback from all respondents was satisfactory and CR ratio was below 0.1, we can consider that the study design is clear enough and adequate for the studied matter. Figure 2 shows a hierarchical presentation of all factors that influence the decision-making process when choosing a tourist destination.

## 4 Results and discussion

Analysis showed that internal factors have the most important role in destination choice (0.594), followed by external factors (0.250) and constraints (0.155), which is consistent with previous findings [51]. Synergy of the results placed all of the travel constraints in the bottom half of the individual items (Figure 3), indicating the dominating role of internal and external motivation elements when it comes to a spa destination choice. Similar results were presented by Vujičić et al. [56], who focused on an urban destination. It must be, however, pointed out that both studies focused on actual visitors. Based on the fact that their visit did actually occur, it is safe to assume that the participants have successfully negotiated through the constraints they faced, thereby considering them less important than psychological and attraction-related factors. A study focused on non-visitors, as a market category more heavily affected by the constraints, would likely yield different results.

Seeking mental peace, seeking physical relaxation, and spending time with family are established as the most important internal factors (Figure 4). When it comes

to research of spa tourists, seeking psychological peace and physical relaxation are among dominant factors in numerous studies [10,15,17,18,21]. Some studies [17,18] in different cultural contexts established socialization only as an accompanying motivational dimension, while in this study it has a more important role. This is in accordance with another study focused on Serbia [14], in which socialization was pointed out as one of the primary motives. Need to escape from the daily routine, work and social pressures was also established as very important, which is in accordance with previous studies [16,18].

The most important health motive in the current study is alleviation for medical condition. Its and other health motives' position below motives related to relaxation, socialization, and escapism is not in accordance with previous studies, focused on Asian [22] and European post-socialist [13] markets. Greater importance of non-medical motives could imply an on-going evolution of the spa demand in Serbia, i.e., a shift from traditional dominance of therapeutical to that of wellness-related motives. Similar conclusions were drawn by Koskinen and Wilska [57], who discussed a potential shift of focus in the spa industry from physical health to mental wellness.

Luxury experience and desire to be seen as modern were established as the least important motives in the current study. Similar motives were pointed out as more important in a study focused on Hong Kong [22], which emphasizes the need for research of spa tourism motivation in diverse socio-economic contexts.

Among the external factors, personal safety, price and offer diversity were established as the most important ones (Figure 5). These three destination attributes are also the most important factors in the whole model, based on the synergy of the individual items. Personal safety was established as the most important external factor, as in previous studies [1,19,58], which is expected since it is one of the primary human needs. This could be interpreted not only as absence of criminal, but also as demand for adequate sanitary conditions of the water and facilities in general. For example, hygienic standards were established as the most important wellbeing holiday attribute by Pesonen et al. [20]. It should be noted that importance of safety measures has since most certainly grown in the light of the current health situation related to COVID-19, which further reinforces its role in the destination choice. When it comes to price, it was also established as the second important spa attribute by Kucukusta and Denizci Guillet [23], while affordability was among the most important wellness motives

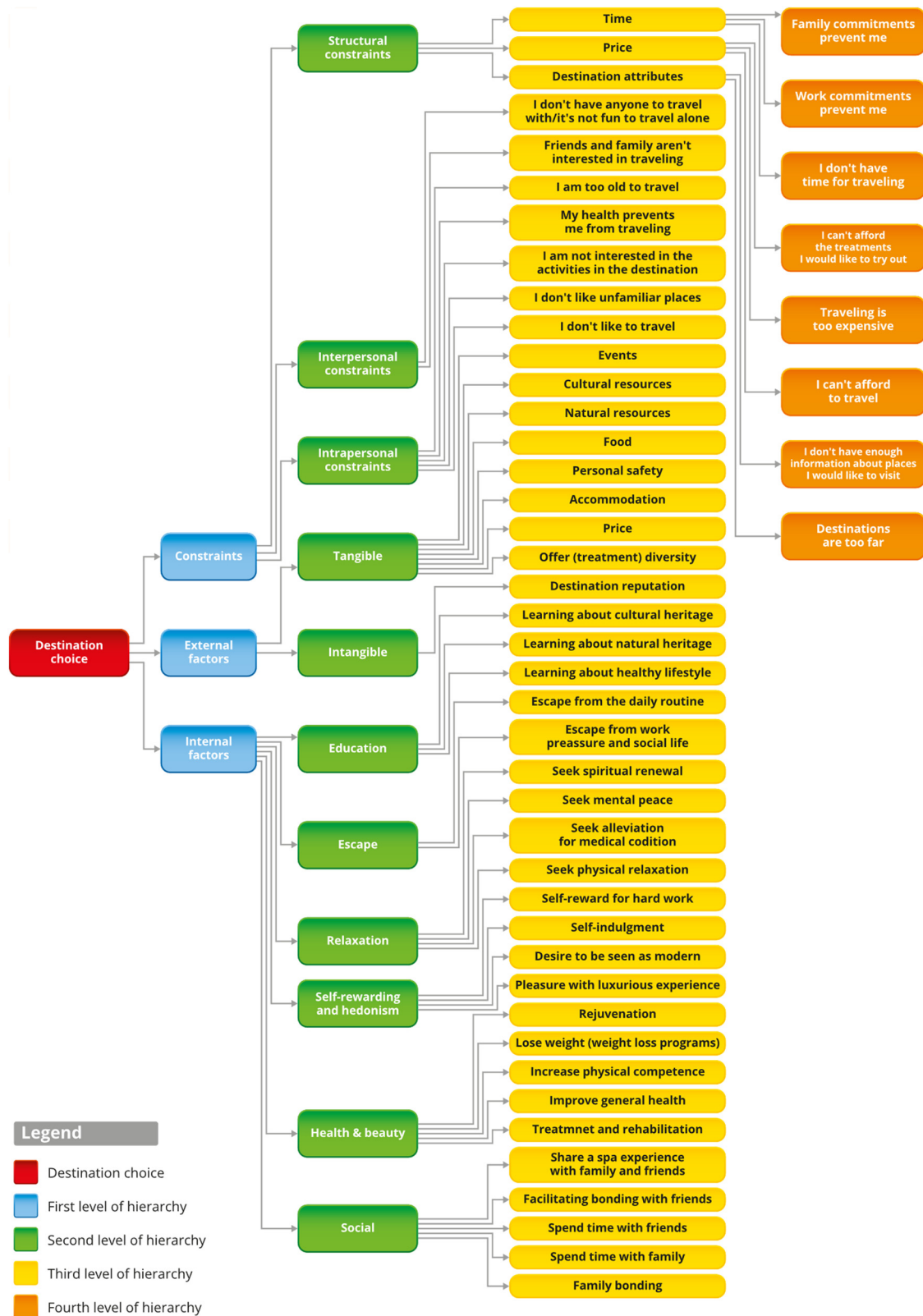


Figure 2: Hierarchical model of factors influencing spa destination choice.

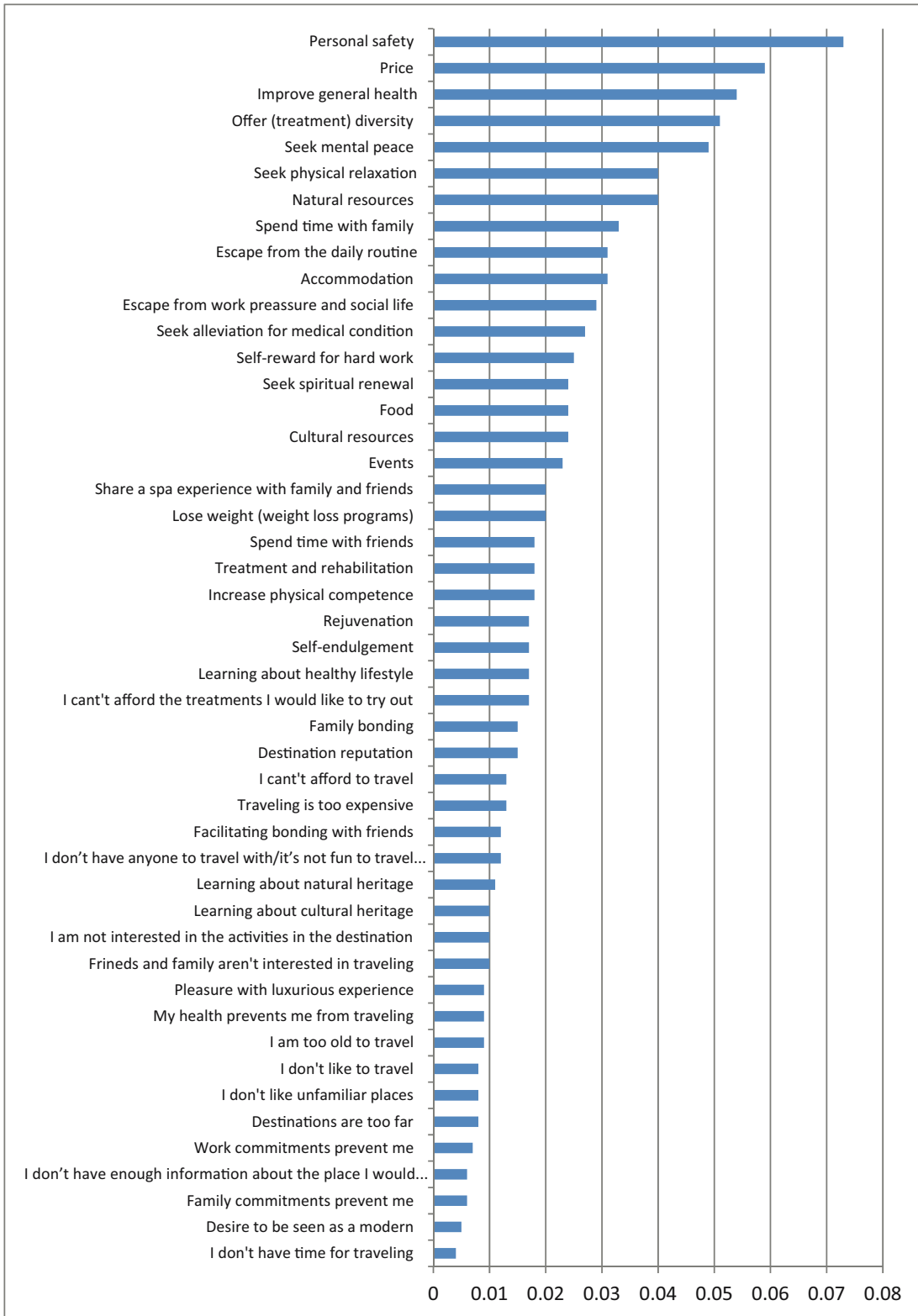


Figure 3: Total weight values for individual items on the lowest level of the hierarchy.



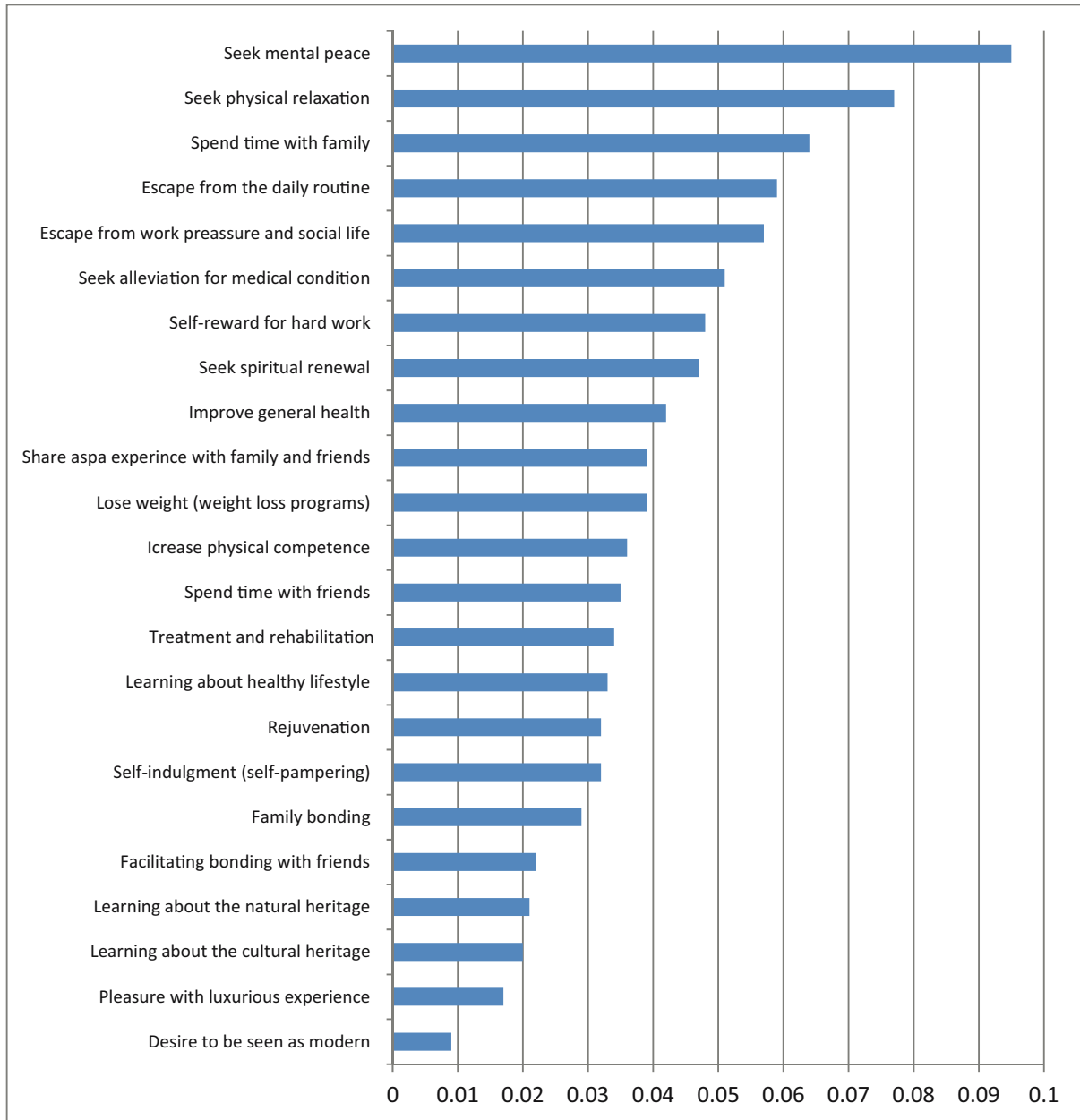


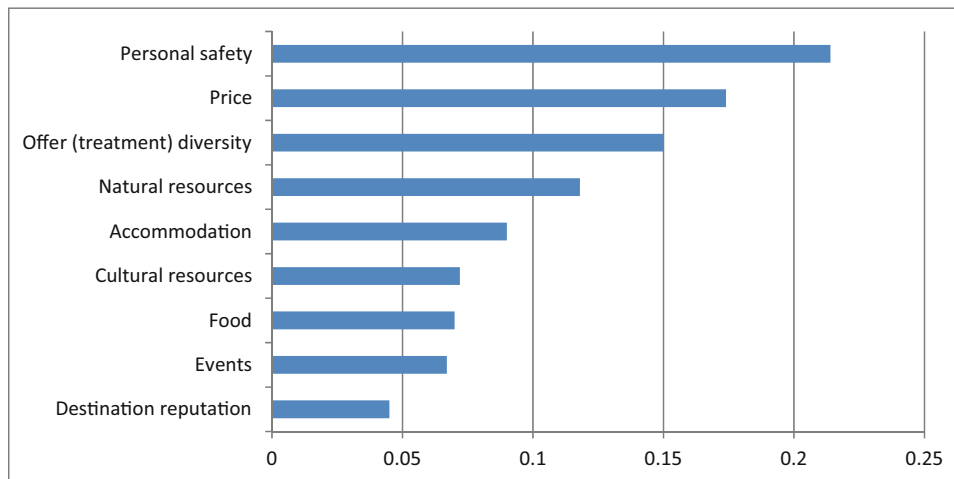
Figure 4: Total weight values for individual internal factors.

in a study by Chen et al. [10]. Diversity of offer has been established as an important pull motive in previous studies [10,19,24].

The important role of the destination’s reputation, i.e. overall image, for the destination choice is well-known in the literature [59,60]. However, its low importance in the current study may be considered in the general context of the spa tourism’s role in the tourism of Serbia. For decades, these destinations were the most important and traditional in Serbia within Yugoslavia, which led to formation of a common and generally

favorable reputation of the industry as a whole. The concept of reputation may have been seen as vague by the participants, whereby its importance was transferred to other external factors which undoubtedly form the reputation, e.g. price and offer diversity. Another explanation is that reputation as prestigious attribute is not consciously considered important, but rather unconsciously through other, more concrete elements of the offer, which form the reputation itself.

The importance of natural resources for spa and wellness tourism is well-established in the literature and the



**Figure 5:** Total weight values for individual external factors.

results of the current study fit into this cognition. The destinations in which the research was conducted are favorably positioned in relation to numerous protected natural areas, ranging from natural monuments (e.g. Đavolja varoš, meaning Devil's Town in Serbian), across nature parks (e.g. Radan Mountain) and special nature reserves (e.g. Goč Mountain–Gvozdac), to a national park (Kopaonik Mountain).

Based on the tourism constraint theory, studied items were classified into following categories: structural (0.596) and interpersonal constraints (0.228) were identified as biggest inhibitors for traveling, while intrapersonal constraints (0.176) were the least inhibiting. Intrapersonal constraints were also established as least important in several previous studies [41,43]. Among the structural constraints, price (0.537) was established as the dominant category, followed by destination attributes (0.237) and time (0.226).

Analysis of the individual constraint items, without considering the pre-arranged categories from the literature, revealed the following results (Figure 6). The three highest rated constraints are price-related, which is consistent with findings of studies focused on other tourism types, e.g. skiing [61] and nature-based tourism [31]. Given the poor economy in Serbia and its potential tourists' low spending power, price was expected to be among the most important constraints affecting destination choice. Inability to pay for the desired treatments was placed higher than the mere absence of funds, showing that although they overcame some financial obstacles, tourists still felt constrained regarding the activities they would like to partake in during the visit but are unable to afford them.

Importance of financial constraints is consistent with the position of price as external factor in the overall synergy, which is only placed behind personal safety. These findings indicate immense importance of the financial aspects of the decision-making process, calling for a well-planned approach to the pricing strategy of the spa destinations' marketers.

Interpersonal factors are second important, indicating social relationship related issues when it comes to traveling – lack of company and disinterest of potential partners. When it comes to information availability, the results of this study show low importance of that item as a constraining factor. This indicates either that information about spa destinations is easily accessible or that in some tourism contexts, i.e. well-known traditional destinations, tourists already possess the majority of needed information. Among the constraints with moderate effect are the individual intrapersonal constraints, which include disinterest in the destination and travel in general, as well as health and age related items.

McGuire [62] pointed out that time constraints either prevent an individual from preparing a trip or shorten the time available for the trip. In this particular case, the desired length of stay may be the cause of lower importance of this constraint category. Unlike traditional spa vacations in socialist countries in the past, which lasted 2–3 weeks, the modern spa experience requires less time. This has effectively made it easier to visit a spa destination despite busy work schedules and other commitments. Contrarily to these findings, Nyaupane and Andereck [32] pointed out time as the most important constraint dimension. However, their study was not focused on a particular tourism type.

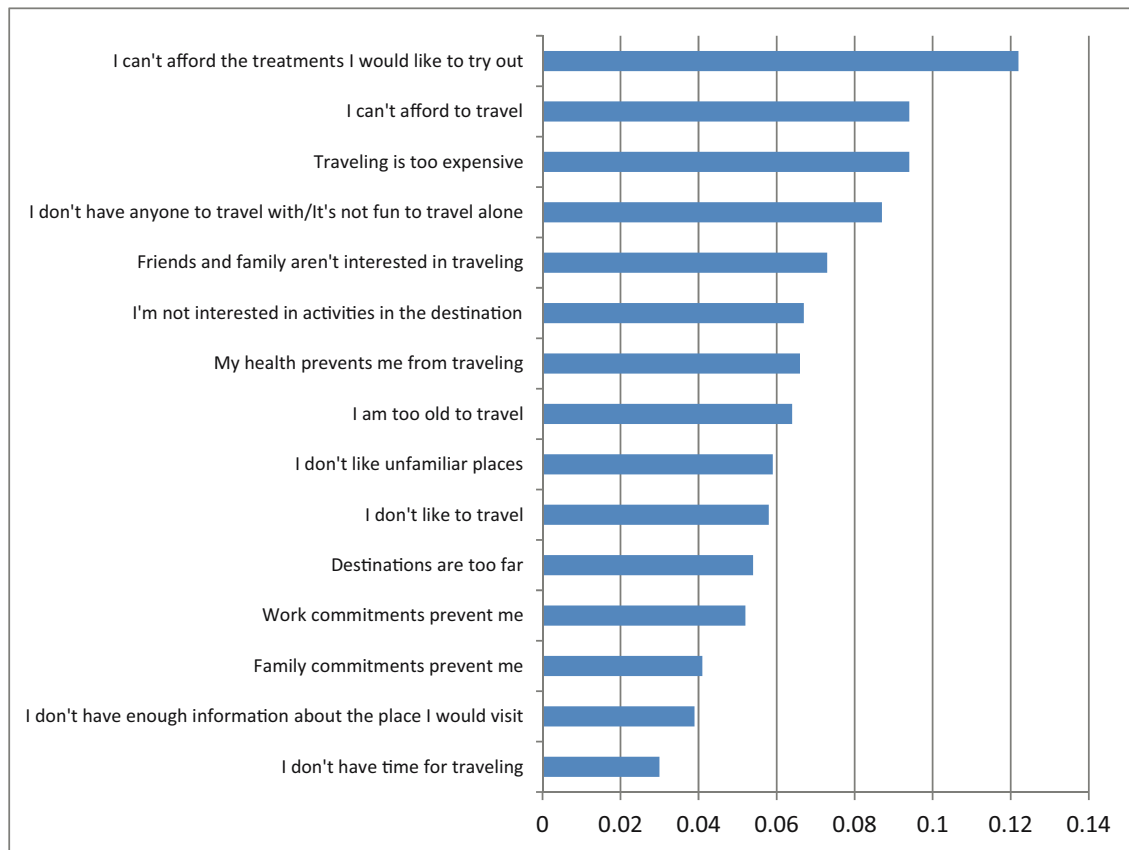


Figure 6: Total weight values for individual constraints.

## 5 Conclusion

Understanding spa destination choices is of paramount importance for leveraging countries' hydro-geothermal potential. To this end, this study represents one of the first uses of an integral model for explaining the destination choice process in the spa tourism context, incorporating role of push and pull motivation, and travel constraints, and the first application of the AHP in spa tourism studies. It also represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to comprehensively approach constraints for spa and wellness tourism by using the hierarchical leisure constraint model, which is widely accepted in the general tourism studies.

In addition to these methodological aspects, the study contributes to the research of spa tourism in different socio-cultural contexts, since it was conducted in traditional spa destinations that have been going through drastic changes since transition started in the 1990s. Given the relative novelty of the wellness offer in the post-socialist tourism market in Serbia, the study provides insight into consumer behavior during an evolutionary phase between the traditional spa and the modern

wellness tourism, taking place in a country with a prolonged economic transition. In that sense, several important findings, which distinguish the Serbian demand market from those in other socio-cultural contexts, need to be emphasized. Serbian spa visitors are more motivated by socialization than those in Texas [17] and Hong Kong [22], less motivated by medical motives than those in Hong Kong [22] and Poland [13], and far less motivated by luxuriousness than those in Hong Kong [22] and in general assign low importance to the destination's reputation in the decision-making process.

### 5.1 Practical implications

Results indicate that internal motivation, particularly its wellness components, has the biggest influence on the decision-making process. This provides the DMOs with the valuable information regarding the focus of their marketing efforts. Namely, rewards that are expected as outcomes of a spa experience, particularly mental and physical relaxation, socialization with family and escapism, should be prioritized in the promotional messages. This will

contribute to the growing cognition of spas as places focused on overall wellness, rather than just its medical components. In addition, product development and improvement should focus on quality of the services that provide these rewards to meet the tourists' needs in the most efficient way. This is particularly important given the high revisit rate of up to 90% after a successful visit [63]. Since personal safety was established as the most important external factor, hygienic standards should be given priority in quality management efforts. Furthermore, complying with government measures against COVID-19 should contribute to the potential tourists' favorable perception of the safety dimension. Since finances emerged as tremendously important element of both external factors and constraints, prices should be particularly carefully planned by the marketers. Price-based product differentiation and various stimuli (e.g. family discounts, which would correspond to familial socialization motive) are among the potentially useful pricing strategies in the Serbian spa and wellness market. A finding reported by Kucukusta and Denizci Guillet [23], regarding the perception of moderate prices as more appealing than not only high (too expensive) but also low prices (they could be seen as a sign of low quality) should be taken into consideration. However, given the cultural differences between the research samples (Hongkongers and Serbians), this information should be additionally explored.

Given the high importance of the offer diversity for the destination choice, variety of treatments and activities should be one of the top priorities for the product development managers. In addition to innovative ways of using the thermo-mineral water for relaxation and alleviation of medical conditions, diversification could be achieved through introduction of alternative forms of wellness, for example retreat centers [64] and spiritual services such as yoga and meditation [65]. Forest wellness represents another possibility, given the number of mountainous protected areas in the proximity of the spa destinations. This option should be considered with particular care, since the natural resources were also established as highly important for the destination choice. In addition, the concept of forest wellness has already been recognized by relevant stakeholders in Serbia, such as Vojvodina šume (public enterprise in charge of managing protected areas in Vojvodina province), the Medical spa Association (NGO focused on education, research, and development in wellness and related fields), and some spa centers (e.g., Prolom spa).

As pointed out by Han et al. [24], one additional benefit of offer diversification is competitiveness boost, which stimulates innovation, quality improvement, and

decrease of prices, as well as causes other effects, such as demand spillover. Raising the awareness of the local entrepreneurship importance would additionally contribute to economic development of destinations [66]. This benefit is particularly useful in a transitional society, in which competitiveness is still developing and needs constant strengthening and cultivation.

Information availability has been pointed out as a factor that contributes to overcoming of some interpersonal constraints [32]. For example, disinterest of family and friend for a particular destination may be decreased by acquainting them with non-spa activities that are available at the destination (e.g. hiking, cultural, and natural monuments). Promotional activities may therefore prove useful in cases where there is a diversified offer in the destination. The management of each spa should develop a tourism strategy depending on the market segment they will mainly focus on and base the spa development according to their needs and preferences [67].

When it comes to overcoming intrapersonal constraints, there are diverse product development and subsequent promotional activities that may be used to achieve this goal. For example, to attract potential tourists who are refraining from visiting it because of their self-perceived old age, a spa destination should first make their product as elderly friendly as possible and then make sure that these adaptations are adequately marketed. When it comes to broader activities, which are not in the destination's jurisdiction, overall improvement of the elderly's self-perception as able and willing tourists, through various active aging policies, would also help decrease the effects of this constraint.

## 5.2 Limitations and future research

The study showed that constraints have a weak influence on the overall decision-making process, which may be caused by the research sample, since it consisted of actual spa tourists in the destination. A study focused on non-visitors or discontinuers (people who visited in the past, but stopped visiting) would likely provide a better insight into constraining factors of the domestic spa demand. Furthermore, identification of appropriate constraint negotiation strategies could provide ways for activation of this dormant segment, particularly regarding the elderly non-travelers.

A recent study of Serbian potential domestic tourists pointed out preference for international destinations as a dominant constraint category when it comes to choosing

ecotourism, urban and traditional mountain destinations [68]. Possible effects of such constraints on the destination choice in the context of modern spa and wellness tourism should be explored.

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