THE OPPORTUNITY OF DEVELOPING RURAL WELLBEING TOURISM IN PUGLIA REGION, ITALY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is facing nowadays a wide range of issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or accentuated by it. The dramatic decline in tourist flows in every destination forced stakeholders to rethink the actual model of business and to adapt to the new reality. The need for social distancing and the fear of tourists to visit crowded places prepared the field for more sustainable tourist activity, based on green products and services. In this context, new and innovative products like rural wellness tourism can take momentum and offer the visitors the opportunity of spending the free time in nature, in less polluted areas and with a higher impact of health.

Italy is one of the most representative tourist destinations worldwide, with a wide range of attractions that make both urban and rural spots to be visited annually by millions of tourists. Tourism also supports the local economy and helps local communities from less developed regions to diversify their sources of income, as is the case of Puglia region, known for its agricultural potential. Puglia is one of the Italian regions where local authorities encourage the development of tourist activities, especially those specific to the ecotourism niche, as a real alternative to agriculture. In the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, ecotourism can represent the solution for a faster economic recovery of the southern region of the country that was dramatically affected by the lockdown imposed by the authorities in the first part of 2020. Based on the wellness tradition from the region and the international reputation of the Termes from this area, Puglia region can develop the concept of rural wellbeing tourism and promote a more sustainable tourist model.

The present paper analyses the potential of Puglia region to introduce in its offer rural wellbeing tourism packages taking into account the profile of a spa and thermal center in the area in terms of structure and business model. The results were obtained by applying a structured questionnaire in one of the most representative thermal units in the region and the answers were interpreted using Qualitative Content Analysis. The results show that Puglia region could thrive the concept of rural wellbeing tourism and adapt it to
INTRODUCTION
The COVID-19 pandemic showed a new context for the tourism industry. The need for social distancing and the increasing fear of tourists to travel on long distances forced the stakeholders to rethink the entire business model that was focused more on quantity. For example, one of the main indicators in the field was the international flows of tourists or the number of nights. In the new context, numbers are not so important any more, because the circulation restrictions made it impossible for travelers to reach international destinations like in the previous years. This new reality forced the main actors in the industry to look for sustainable tourism products that also allow tourists to keep the distance and to enjoy their holiday, like ecotourism, rural tourism, rural wellness tourism and other similar niches.

Italy is one of the most attractive countries for international tourists. The wide range of resources and its history as a tourism destination enables a wide variety of tourist activities. Despite the cultural attractions that facilitate by their nature a low degree of seasonality, having tourists all over the year is still a challenge [1] and stress the necessity of innovation in this field. Moreover, the mass tourism that is common, especially in the North part of the country and increased since the 1920s [2]. It recorded a peak in the last years, with negative influences on the local environment, economy and business governance but more importantly, the people, culture, heritage and traditions [3]. The tourist flows affected the relationship between the local community and visitors dramatically. One representative example is Venice. Its population of 500,000 inhabitants regularly accuses the negative impact on the city of the more than 30 million visitors annually. To mitigate the negative impact of the guests, the authorities have already launched several measures, like the #EnjoyRespectVenezia campaign [4]. Another example of Italian destination for international tourists that was first designed as a sustainable spot and the high interest of the guests affected its natural value is Cinque Terre located in the northwest of Italy [5].

In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, the North part of Italy, as well as the entire country has now a new challenge to pass. Italy was the fifth most popular destination in the world in 2019, and the lockdown of the country leads to an unprecedented decline in tourism flows. In this context, the tourist arrivals are estimated by

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1 The results of this paper were presented at SGEM Conference 2020.
Euromonitor International at a decrease of 8 million arrivals in 2020 compared to the baseline. However, the tourism crises can also represent a chance for Italy to rebuild its tourism model and to focus on long-term sustainability [6] which would help many destinations to boost their level of attractiveness [7]. The increased competition on the tourism market and the new profile of the guests that are now looking more for experiences and less for traditional tourism services [8], as well as the new context of social distancing, moved the attention of the stakeholders to the south part of the country. Southern regions also have a tourist tradition and compared to the North ones, they are already oriented to a more sustainable approach, being promoted especially agritourism, thermal tourism, wine tours, gastronomic tourism and sports tourism. Based on the natural potential of Italy, in terms of both rural and wellness tourism, a specific tourist product that could be implemented is the rural wellness tourism that respects the actual norms of social distancing. Rural wellness tourism can use the rural landscape of Italy, that is known worldwide, as the necessary infrastructure for the tourism activity with a high impact on the guests' health [9].

The present study represents a descriptive analysis of a spa and thermal center located in Santa Cesarea Terme from Puglia region (also known as Apulia) to investigate if rural wellbeing tourism could be adopted as an innovative new product. We wanted to see which is the profile of a four-star spa and thermal center from Puglia and how the manager interprets the market and changes in the structure of demand. Starting from this profile, we could anticipate if a new type of tourism product, like rural wellbeing tourism, would be accepted by such a unit. The study represents a part of a complex research about the opportunity of adopting the innovative concept of rural wellbeing tourism by the countries with both agricultural and wellness natural resources located in the same region, like Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy or Hungary. The results consist an important insight from the stakeholders in the field to make evidence-based decisions in their activity and help the business sector to understand the importance of the transition from the mass tourist model to a more sustainable one which requires good preparation.

THE CONCEPT OF RURAL WELLBEING TOURISM

Rural wellbeing tourism represents an innovative form of tourism that is connected with the Nordic European countries and integrates activities that can take place in rural communities with holistic activities that have a positive impact on mental wellness [10].

According to Smith and Puczko (2017), rural wellbeing tourism can combine mainly 14 categories of activities to be adopted by the tourists and to create a market for this type of tourism: treatments and spa, slow living, exercises, alternative medicine, local life, wilderness, outdoor activities, meditation, eco-village, outdoor sports, learning about nature, walking in nature, museums, sleeping [11]. Rural wellbeing tourism has as main motivation the need for relaxation of the tourists with a focus of comfort, but not on luxurious elements [12]. It was developed based
on the increasing popularity from the last decades of spa and wellness tourism and the changes in population structure, like ageing, that conducted to innovation and looking for new tourist products [13]. All of these activities can be performed in the southern region of Italy, that already has a history in ecotourism and thermalism and can be adapted considering the profile of the region [14]. Also, these activities are in connection with the new rules of social distancing, required in the new context of COVID-19 pandemic, which would allow tourism activities to take place without interruption in this area.

Italy is one of the European countries recognized as a certified destination for wellness and thermal tourism [15]. The country has the largest number of spas in Europe (350 spas) located in 20 regions and 170 municipalities. The model of Italian thermal centers is based on a close collaboration with the Italian National Health Service and the Government funds many services. The most famous ones attract 80% of the total of tourists flows and are concentrated in five regions: Tuscany, Veneto, Trentino Alto-Adige, Emilia-Romagna, and Campania [16]. However, the changes in the demand structure ask for more integration of tourism offer and emphasize the need for new tourist products.

Taking into account the two types of tourism that are well known in the South part of Italy, including Puglia region: agritourism and thermal tourism, we believe they can combine successfully in a new innovative product under the umbrella of rural wellbeing tourism. Considering that in countries as Austria or Finland, wellbeing tourism establishments are often located in a rural environment [17] the southern regions in Italy, like Puglia can represent the place for first approaches in this direction. This niche should be well received by the guests based on its connection with the new requirements of the guests and would increase the attractiveness of tourism in this part of the country.

Following the model of northern European countries that implemented the rural wellbeing tourism successfully, we believe Puglia region has the resources needed to adapt and implement this concept too. National and local authorities promote the region in tourism as a destination for ecotourism. On the website of the National Agency of Tourism, the description of the region includes phrases as “picturesque historical villages”, “countryside”, “folkloristic traditions” [18]. On the official website of the region, there are promoted activities as Holiday in a Farmhouse or A day in Casa Puglia [19]. Puglia is also promoted as a destination for thermalism. The official tourism portal has dedicated information about the three thermal resorts located here: Margherita di Savoia, Santa Cesarea Terme and Castelnuovo della Daunia.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this study, the authors wanted to investigate which is the profile of a wellness and thermal center located in Puglia region and if its representative is aware of the changes in the demand structure. Once we accomplished this step of the research, we could anticipate if the center could adapt its offer quickly according to the new requirements of the market and if the management could support the implementation of a new rural
wellbeing tourism product in the region. In this regard, we applied a structured questionnaire consisting of 21 questions sent by email to the representative of one of the most famous spa centers in Santa Cesarea Terme, located in Apulia, southern Italy. The results were interpreted using Qualitative Content Analysis. At this stage of the research, it is essential to investigate the profile of the unit and the awareness of the management regarding a new form of tourism that can help the unit and the destination to gain more recognition. Also, in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, that contracted tourism figures in all the countries in 2020, with a high impact on Italy, it is important to research if sustainable tourist products that involve social distancing could be implemented easily.

The unit is a four-star complex that provides food and accommodation and has a large spa and thermal center that offers a wide variety of services: massage, beauty treatments and thermal therapies. It receives both tourists that chose spa packages and also tourists that opted for specific health therapies. The unit is located in Santa Cesarea Terme, a destination that attracts tourists since 1700. The resort is famous because of the thermal waters that are indicated for different therapeutic usage and are also recommended for general wellbeing and beauty treatments.

The two main objectives of the study are:

(i) to identify the profile of the unit in terms of tourist activity. In this regard, we designed 13 questions that helped us to describe the actual business model of the center

(ii) to see how the unit manager perceives the market and how the new changes in demand structure are approached. In this regard, we designed eight questions to have an in-depth view of the potential flexibility of the unit to adopt and support new business models.

We specify that the questionnaire did not include aspects regarding rural wellbeing tourism explicitly because we did not want to influence the answers. In this part of the research, we were interested in the profile of the unit and the reaction of the manager at the changes in the demand structure.

The approach of the research that is focused more on finding the opinion of the management of the unit regarding the new changes in demand structure is vital in the context of the pandemic situation. The actual situation implies a switch from the traditional way of doing business, focused on the number of tourists to a sustainable way, focused on spending time in nature and avoiding crowded destinations. In this regard, the present research consists of an important insight for the stakeholders. It can be used as a starting point in designing more appropriate touristic products to the actual situation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
The primary step to understand the profile of a thermal unit (i) from the southern part of Italy is to investigate the services provided by the unit, the usage of local natural resources and the profile of the tourists. For more precise results interpretation, we combined the 13 questions from the first part of the questionnaire in three
categories (Table 1) that we consider relevant for this stage of the research.

Taking into account the results of the first part of the questionnaire, we can conclude that the unit we included in the study is mainly focused on the domestic market and limits its offer to the tourists from the region. The results confirm the first impression from the website analyses, where the content is available only in Italian, which indicates the market addressed. The small proportion of foreign tourists (5%) may be connected with the lack of information in other languages from the website. Also, the high ratio of social tourists (80%) is another indicator that suggests the unit addresses mainly to the domestic market.

Another aspect is the interest of the unit in using local products in the spa and therapeutic procedures and the special skincare line that is also validated by the tourists’ interest in these products. Interesting is the proportion of the guests in terms of age. The same proportion of young tourists and aged tourists (30% each category) confirm the opinion of the units’ representative regarding the tourist’s motivation when they choose this four-star unit to spend their holiday. Tourists are now attracted by the common modern idea that the services provided by a thermal center are beneficial for their wellbeing, and the existing unit has all the advantages needed.

Also, the center is affected by the seasonality, despite the fact wellness and spa services can be provided without interruption in any month of the year. This suggests that tourists could expect a new approach of the center and would like to receive additional services, not only those specific to wellness and spa.

In order to see how the unit representative perceives the market (ii) and if a new

Table 1 The profile of the unit

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of questions</th>
<th>Answers description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Services provided by the unit</td>
<td>The unit provides a wide range of services (excluding recovery therapies) and has also a dedicated offer for social tourism. The services are available from April to December. In the rest of the year, the center is closed because of the seasonality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The usage of local natural resources in therapies and beauty procedures</td>
<td>The unit uses local products for therapies and health procedures, especially mood and curative waters and developed a dedicated line of skincare products that are used on the spot and are also sold to the customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The profile of the tourists</td>
<td>Tours are mainly from Italy, and around 80% of them benefit from social packages funded by the Italian Government. Most of them, 70%, are Italians from the region, 25% are Italian tourists from the rest of the country, and 5% are foreign tourists, mostly from Switzerland and Germany. In terms of age, the highest proportion is formed by adults (40%), followed by aged tourists and young tourists (30% each category). The most preferred products by the tourists are: massage cream, thermal mud, facial mud mask, sulphurous soap and refilled skin cream.</td>
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Source: Developed by the authors based on the results of the study presented at the SGEM Conference 2020 [20]
innovative product, like rural wellbeing tourism, would be agreed, we combined the eight questions from the second part of the questionnaire in four categories: the opinion of the manager about the tourist market, the perception of the manager about the actions needed in order to stay competitive, the marketing strategy adopted and how he thinks the Academia could help the units from this sector (Table 2).

The manager of the unit is aware of the changes in the demand structure and adapts the offer in accordance with it. Providing services for young tourists that were not interested before in this type of tourism and considering to introduce new packages to mitigate the effects of organizational stress prove the willing of the manager to be connected to the real market and to anticipate new trends.

Table 2 The perception of the unit manager

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<tr>
<th>Category of questions</th>
<th>Answers description</th>
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<tr>
<td>The opinion of the unit representative regarding the market</td>
<td>The manager of the unit considers that tourists choose this center because of the modern idea that the services provided here are beneficial for their wellbeing. He also noticed an increased interest from the young tourists in the spa and thermal therapies in the last five years. The main reason for this change is the increased offer of treatments that can be applied to this age category. He also takes into consideration to include dedicated packages for recovering after organizational stress. In terms of actual challenges that a spa and thermal center faces nowadays, the manager found the most important the interest in wellness therapies, the trust of the population in them and the annual costs of the unit. The less important are competition, the new “power” of tourists that can express their opinion online and the online marketing tools which are in a continuous evolution. The budget of the tourist had medium importance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How the manager sees the development of the unit in the future in order to stay competitive</td>
<td>The main actions a spa and thermal center should take into consideration are renovating the spaces and construction of indoor pools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marketing strategy</td>
<td>The unit promotes its offer through various ways: traditional marketing channels (tour operators), unit website, booking platforms, social media platforms and through the collaboration with researchers that allows the unit to be connected to Academia. From all of these, the most suitable way for the unit to promote online is, in the opinion of the manager, the official website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How could Academia help more this sector?</td>
<td>Researchers in the field should approach more subjects related to the association of spa and thermal therapies with other issues, like: alimentation, sports, music, dance, etc.</td>
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Source: Developed by the authors based on the results of the study presented at the SGEM Conference 2020 [20]
Also, he is aware of the importance of continually improving the aspect of the center and having a developed infrastructure. The high interest of young generation for wellness and spa services also indicates the need for innovative services in tourism. Taking into account the difference in terms of preferences between the old generation and young generation, a switch to a different approach of tourism services could be a good decision to retain the young tourists in the following years.

Another aspect included in the research is that thermal resorts are widely recognized for their scientifically-proven benefits on wellbeing and in Italy, using healing waters has a history that dates from millennium. However, spending the holiday in these locations is more a matter of trend. The manager is aware of this aspect of health tourism and identifies it as one of the significant changes for the industry that has more importance than the budget of the tourists or than adopting modern marketing tools.

Regarding marketing tools, the unit representative considers the official website the most important for promotion, but he also uses other channels for promotion: tour operators, booking platforms and social media. He also understands the importance of Academia in the field and collaborates with researchers for various study. For the future, he suggests researchers to investigate which activities can complete the offer of a wellness and thermal center and to investigate the link with alimentation, sports, music and other similar activities.

CONCLUSION

Italian tourism faces nowadays new challenges and the lockdown of the country of nearly two months at the beginning of 2020, emphasises the need for a reconfiguration of the tourism offer. The need for integration of different types of tourism in new and innovative packages is obvious and could represent a solution for proper development of tourism in the southern part of the country, that is less popular among international tourists.

The results of this study present the point of view of one of the managers of a top spa and thermal center from Santa Cesareo Terme and help the stakeholders from the field to have an overview idea regarding the opportunity of introducing new tourism packages, like rural wellbeing tourism. According to the answers of the questionnaire, the unit is oriented to the domestic market and attracts tourists mainly from the region. The offer of social packages suggests that the unit has a flow of clients that has as main motivation the presence of social packages funded by the Italian Government. However, a switch to the international market can be done. Through a more actual communication in the online environment, especially on the own website through developing other language versions of the content would help the proportion of foreign tourists to increase from the actual ratio of 5%. An international orientation would allow the unit to mitigate the period affected by seasonality and to reduce the inactivity period that lasts now three months every year.

The fact that the manager of the unit is aware of the actual challenges of the market and realize the impact of the trends
on the sector suggests that he is opened to find out new ways to present the units' offer. He also could consider integrating other types apart from the ones he already promotes in new and innovative products. Also, the fact he collaborates with the Academia and understands the role of researchers in tourism and the fact he already knows how Academia could help the units demonstrates he would like to find out new suggestions from researchers. In this regard, indicating a new tourism package that is innovative for the south part of Italy, which would include the concept of rural wellbeing tourism, can represent a starting point for a more detailed discussion.

In terms of the current pandemic situation, the study is relevant for both Academia and business sector. It completes the knowledge regarding the touristic products that can be adopted in the South of Italy for and in other regions that have the necessary resources for rural wellbeing tourism. The results also support the Italian tourism stakeholders to realize that the transition from mass tourism to more sustainable tourism will happen in the future in a more accelerated way that it has been previously estimated.

However, the present study has several limitations. It addresses only one unit and the results cannot be generalized. Also, more research is needed in other units from the south of Italy and even a geographical distribution in this area would be necessary to see if the general opinion of the managers in the region is the same and if the adoption of a new and innovative touristic product would be accepted. Even though this study represents the point of view of only one unit’s representative from the south part of Italy, and we cannot generalize the results of the research, it represents a valuable starting point. Suggesting a new type of tourist package that has been successfully implanted in the north countries of Europe, but that is not well known in Italy can be a challenge. So, we consider it is necessary that this step to be done gradually, starting from the typology of the units from a specific area and the view of the managers regarding the changes of the market. We believe that only after accomplishing this step, we can continue the process of presenting the advantages and the opportunities of implementing the concept of rural wellbeing tourism. In this regard, we consider that rural wellbeing tourism can be adopted on the specific of Puglia region and transformed in a new innovative type of tourism for the south of Italy.

REFERENCE


