

Article

Can Spa Tourism Enhance Water Resources and Turn Them into a National Brand? A Theoretical Review about the Romanian Case

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Abstract: The present article includes descriptive research about how water resources in Romanian medical spas could be better promoted to increase their visibility. Romania is one of the European countries with impressive potential in terms of balneology, having a wide diversity of natural factors that allow treating several medical conditions in the same resort. In addition, one-third of the mineral and thermal water springs in Europe are present on the Romanian territory, making Romania one of the most important European destinations in terms of natural spa resources. The present research aims to illustrate how the Romanian medical spas communicate with tourists about the therapeutic water available in five medical spas: Băile Felix-1 Mai, Techirghiol, Băile Tușnad, Sovata and Covasna, having as its main objective to raise the awareness among the spas representatives regarding the necessity of water management implementation. The research is based on primary data obtained from the official websites of the resorts included in the study and in the published scholarly articles that approached the Romanian medical spas.

Keywords: spa; medical spa; Romanian balneology; healing waters; Romanian spa; water resources; water resources in tourism; water tourism



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1. Introduction

Water resources have always been connected to the development of trade in goods and the mobility of people [1], and are a large part of human existence [2]. Water represents one of the essential resources in the tourism industry and is present in almost every main stage of the value chain. It is a critical pillar of tourist infrastructure, where hotels are the most dependable and the most significant consumer of water resources. Recreational activities in tourism also need water, such as for water sports, fishing [3], water tours [4] and health tourism. Even though water is used in almost every stage of the tourist service, from laundry to swimming or for recreational purposes, there is a lack of awareness among travellers regarding the impact of their behavior [5] as they tend to consume more water while on holiday than at home [6].

In areas where water resources are rich in quantity and quality, they can be used for health and wellness purposes, even turning water into the tourist product itself. This is the case for wellness and spa tourism, where water has been used to heal for millennia. The connection between healing waters and human health has been investigated in more detail over the last few decades [7], amid criticism regarding the impact of waters used by spas on various conditions. Even though many studies investigate the need to protect water resources [8–10] and highlight the economic impact of spa tourism activity [11] there are still gaps in the literature regarding the management of water resources in spa tourism, mainly in Eastern European countries, and about the economic benefits of exploiting therapeutic waters in medical spas. The previous studies in tourism focused mainly on

the origin [12,13] or physicochemical structure of water used in tourism or its medical components, as is the case of health resorts. Although the impact of water resources in tourism is well known, there are not many studies that investigate the multiplier role of water resources in the economy and demonstrate their impact on the local communities in areas where water is used in tourism activity, as is the case of resorts with balneology tradition. Previous research has also focused on the impact of tourism on water resources and the need for a more sustainable approach.

Water is a limited resource that in many regions of the globe raises concerns regarding the available quantities. Because it is a critical resource in tourism activity [14], there are many concerns among specialists about the high amounts of wasted water that could be avoided. Even though, according to Gössling et al., the direct-related water use in the tourism sector is less than 1% of the global consumption overall, the differences from one region to another [15] convinced tourist representatives to realize the importance of water management and to look for solutions. Moreover, due to climate change [16], conserving water resources has become a priority [17] and in some parts of the globe it has prompted the hotel industry to take measures, as the hotel sector is considered the most responsible in the tourism industry in terms of water use and waste [18]. In this context, many hotel chains adopted ways to monitor water use. It is known that water is an essential factor in the production of hotel activities. On average, a guest consumes three times more water in a hotel than at home [19]. However, it was proven that big chain hotels obtain the best results, while the smaller ones, particularly the hotels that are not included in a chain, do not have the same interest in resource management [20]. It was also proved that the location of a hotel in a region where the water price is higher is a driving factor for the accommodation unit to adopt resource management [21]. Moreover, the big hotels are more efficient in water management as they can make economies of scale and are advantaged by higher occupancy rates and modern technical capacity [22]. One of the solutions to mitigate water waste is through awareness campaigns aimed at tourists regarding their behavior and their impact on water waste [23,24], informing guests about the benefits of daily conservation activities, both for themselves and society [25].

One European country that relies on water in its tourism activity is Romania. Spa and wellness tourism is well developed in Romania and is one of the oldest tourism forms in the country, having a high impact on economic development [26]. The country's main natural resources include mineral, thermal and salt waters in various health procedures, such as spa treatments used as preventive treatments, wave-therapy that uses the seawater from the Black Sea, which is known for its curative properties, and for hydrotherapy [27]. As water is a limited and vulnerable natural resource, it needs to be protected by the law. In Romania, the use and exploitation of water resources are regulated by the Water Law No.107/1996. In spa destinations, water is also used for décor, comfort, for curative purposes and for leisure activities [28]. The Romanian curative waters that can be used in balneology can be divided into 11 categories, according to their chemical composition [29] and have different origins. In the Băile Tușnad Spa, for instance, the healing groundwaters have a meteoric origin with specific isotopic effects [30].

Over the centuries, Romanian spas have experienced several development periods, such as the Roman period, the Austrian period (18th–19th century), the royalty period (beginning of 20th century), the communist period, and post-communist period [31]; the effects of the communist regime can still be seen today. The insurance system still influences Romanian spa tourism [32] as the spa services connected to health recovery are covered up to 70% by the National Health Insurance House [33]. To improve its visibility and attract more foreign tourist, Romanian spas should focus more on the international trend of segmentation and focus on the specific requirements of one category of tourists [34].

The present article includes a descriptive analysis of how the water resources in five Romanian medical spas are illustrated on the official websites of the resorts. The research also analyses the primary research subjects of the scholarly articles that contain research about the selected resorts, and includes a series of recommendations that would

increase the visibility of the Romanian spas and help support the implementation of water management in the spas. The main purpose of the present research is to illustrate how the Romanian medical spas communicate with the general public regarding therapeutic water resources used in spa therapies, which is their main approach in this regard. The study also intends to show if the Romanian spas give details on their official websites about the water management systems that are already implemented, or which will be implemented in the future. Through this investigation, we aim to create awareness among the spas' representatives regarding the necessity of protecting water resources, especially in the case of spa tourism, where water represents the product itself. The present study is based on primary data, obtained from the official websites of the resorts included in the research, and from the scholarly articles that approached the study of the water resorts in Romanian spas.

1.1. The Water as a Primary Resource in Tourism

Besides the role of water in supporting tourism activity, as it is the case of hotels and transportation [35], water is also the main resource for many activities in tourism such as water sports, sunbathing and health tourism [36]. Water is the symbol of health tourism through its two major components: spa tourism and wellness tourism. With this in mind, the "taking the waters" concept could represent more than the use of the waters for healing and touristic purposes. Travelling to medical resorts for ones health is part of many cultures and has been an old tradition in Europe since the Greek and Roman empires [37]; people having been travelling to improve their health status for more than 2000 years [38]. There is also evidence to show that in Asia, North America [39], South America [40], Australia, or in Muslim cultures [41], bathing for healing is also an old custom. In addition to relaxation purposes, water cures have been used for their healing properties for a wide spectrum of diseases, such as "musculoskeletal, dermatological, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases" [42]. They are also known to improve the quality of life and pain management in patients who have diabetes [43].

Over the centuries, spas have recorded different evolution cycles and have experienced both periods of glory and decades of stagnation, or even decline. The spa town of Bath in England and Bad Gögging in Germany [44] are only two examples of European spas with a long history proving the impact of the time regarding resort activity [45]. The popularity of spas reached their highest level in the 18th and 19th centuries [46] when numerous thermal spas were built in Europe to help restore the physical and mental health of citizens [47]. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a switch from the medical approach of spas to the leisure experience [48] that was not as visible in Eastern European countries, such as Romania. This approach still influences modern spas today, and have expanded to develop thermal springs touristic products that include local-specific healing methods [49].

Modern spas still use the same healing waters for similar purposes as they did a millennia ago, proving their importance in many cultures. Traditional resorts or medical spas are mainly found in "Germany, France, the Baltic States, Central and Eastern European countries and Russia" [50]. Even though the use of healing waters is global, there is no agreed definition for healing waters for medical purposes. Moreover, there is often confusion between spa, wellness, health tourism, and medical tourism. Smith and Puczkó (2014) specify the differences between the terms and describe health tourism as an umbrella terminology: spa and wellness tourism, which in Europe has a therapeutic connotation [51], and medical tourism, which is based on invasive procedures [52]. There are many terms used, such as hydrotherapy, balneology, and thermalism [53], all of which connect the therapeutic effects of healing waters with the health improvement status of the patients. Balneology, for example, which is defined as using baths containing thermal and mineral water for treatment and rehabilitation [54], is used as a complementary therapy in various conditions [55]. Many Central Eastern European countries still apply the concept of thermal medicine as a discipline that studies the effects of thermal cures on human health [56], as it is the case in Romania.

The type of uses of waters in spa and wellness tourism are multiple. Geothermal waters, for instance, are linked with spa activity, as 25% of the geothermal waters worldwide are used for this purpose [57]. Another example is thalassotherapy, which is very popular in Western European countries and consists of procedures that use seawater to heal the body [58].

1.2. The Use of Water in the Romanian Spa Tourism

In Romania, water has been used for healing for a millennia, and the country is internationally known as one of the leading spa destinations in terms of natural potential. One-third of the European mineral and thermal waters are on Romanian territory, which has determined the development of balneoclimateric resorts, also known as spas [59]. It is not known exactly how old the custom of using waters for healing is in Romania's actual region, as little research has been conducted in this direction. Still, the archaeological evidence places the custom of bathing during the Roman times at least. Therefore, we can discuss 2000 years of experience of using therapeutic waters for healing on the actual territory of Romania. Romanian spas developed nationally in the 19th century, when the most known water sources have been studied. This was also the century when most resorts were developed [60].

The most important categories of waters used in the Romanian balneology are mineral waters. Romania has over 2000 mineral water springs [61], geothermal waters [62], thermal waters and salted waters from therapeutic lakes [63]. Another classification places waters in the following categories: "Chlorosodic water, Sulphate waters, Ferruginous waters, Iodine water, Sulphurous waters, Oligometalic waters, Carbonated waters, Alkaline waters, Tero and tero-alkaline waters, Radioactive waters" [64]. Healing mineral waters come from natural sources, such as a spring, lake, or borehole, and should meet at least one of the following five rules: "(a) the waters must be mineralized or contain dissolved mineral salts over 1 g/L; (b) to be present certain chemical elements with known pharmacological action, in minimum necessary proportions; (c) to have a content of dissolved gases with biological effects, in established concentrations—1000 mg CO₂/L, 1 mg H₂S/L; (d) to have a temperature above 20 degrees C, regardless of the mineral content, which gives them the characteristic of thermal waters; and (e) to have a scientifically recognized therapeutic action" [65].

In order to classify a source of water as "mineral" and for it to be used in spa therapies, there are necessary medical studies that certify the healing effects of the water. Moreover, hot springs may contain different compounds that would make the water suitable or not for spa cures [66]. The characteristics of waters make them suitable for internal or external cures and for specific diseases, used for prophylaxis purposes, curative, or recovery. Mineral waters "that contain CO₂ are the result of filtering deep water through volcanic soils and have a complex and varied composition of different elements contained in the soil layers" [67]. For spa therapy, "chlorosodic waters contain more than 1 g/L NaCl and those waters that have a higher concentration of NaCl than 14 g/L are considered salt waters. In each situation, no matter the type of the water, studies are needed to identify the stability of the curative water, both at the source and in the packaged state, and the results must be compared with the legal norms" [68].

The abundance of water resources [69] means that mineral water can also be used for drinking. According to Bodor et al. (2021), on the Romanian market, all the types of mineral waters for drinking are available, except those with a very low mineral content [70].

Nowadays, Romania is one of the countries in Europe that uses the concept of medical spas and bases its development business model on social tourism, in addition to Poland [71], Croatia [72] or Serbia [73]. This approach did not help the sector develop as it is not based on excellence or high-quality services, and there is an acute need to reduce the dependence of spa tourism on the social system [74]. There is also a lack of modern research infrastructure that would allow a constant evaluation of the thermal and mineral waters [75]. In Romania, this field has focused mainly on medical services rather than tourism, similar to western

resorts in Europe; an approach that did not help the development of the spa sector in Romania, and only a few units tried to position their offer for the international market, which expresses the need for a change [76]. There is also no brand regarding the water resources that can be associated with one Romanian balneotherapy product [77], which constitutes another weakness for the Romanian spas. As a result, almost 90% of tourists in the spas are from Romania and the majority are seniors that use treatment tickets [78]. In other European destinations that use the concept of medical spas, the situation is very different. Germany, for example, which is also famous for medical spas, has built a clear profile for each resort that successfully attracts different segments of tourists [79]. In this context, differentiation is not visible in Romanian spas from the point of view of the tourists' profiles. Additionally, even though Romania is one of the richest countries in terms of natural resources, it does not have an adequate infrastructure according to its potential [80], which means that stage of the Romanian medical spas is still influenced by the communist period. Despite the fact that it has been 30 years since the fall of the communist regime in Romania, not enough time has passed for the spa units to modernize according to the standards that tourism demands [81], which asks for new experiences [82] rather than the classical tourist product. The majority of the hospitality infrastructure has remained the same [32], which has caused the image of the Romanian spas from one year to another to decline in terms of service quality.

Besides their natural potential, Romanian medical spas have several advantages which can build the premise that Romanian medical spas can be promoted internationally if the proper investment is made. On the one hand, the wide range of natural resources in only one location makes possible the treatment of several conditions in the same resort [83]. On the other hand, the wide range of mineral/thermal waters constitutes another advantage. Over 2500 springs in Romania of different types can be used in balneotherapy treatment in activities such as drinking cure, bathing cure, aerosols, or other specific treatments [33]. Other advantages include the low price of the offer and the lack of seasonality [84]. However, these competitive advantages have not been fully utilized. Only 10% of the springs are utilized [85], and the Romanian potential in many parts of the country remains only at a theoretical stage, at least for the moment.

Spa tourism is essential for Romania, both from a socio-economic [86] and health perspective. Firstly, the use of healing waters has an important multiplier effect for stakeholders, and the tourist flow, as it attracts a relatable stable number of tourists [87]. It also helps the cultural transfer between tourists and local communities with a high impact on the socio development of the resorts. Secondly, the medical spas are used to improve population health as complementary treatments, balneology being a medical specialization in Romania.

2. Materials and Methods

The present research describes the current image of mineral and thermal waters in Romanian medical spas at a time when water as a primary resource is considered a critical source globally that should be protected. In the context of the need for action regarding water management in tourism, we consider that it is necessary to illustrate the actual stage of promoting water resources in the most notorious Romanian medical spas on their official online channel (website). Water management is a necessity in Romanian spas because the healing waters are limited resources, and their quality can be influenced by various factors. In this context, we consider that the first step that would help implement water management at a large scale would be increasing awareness among tourist representatives and even among guests. The present study represents the first step of a future complex collaboration between Academic and tourist representatives regarding the implementation of a water management system that would protect the healing waters and make them available for future generations. The study also includes a series of recommendations in the discussion part of the paper that would help develop the resorts [88].

Water is wasted in many stages of the tourism process, mainly because of the unsustainable behavior of the guests in spa establishments and because of the losses during the balneotherapy treatments. These aspects highlight the need to increase awareness among spa tourism representatives to implement water management systems. Besides the environmental costs, there is also the economic cost of the waste of water resources, as mineral and thermal waters are national resources, and the authorities perceive fees for their use. In this regard, we believe that the present study offers valuable insights for the stakeholders in the field to better valorize water resources. In this regard, the main objectives of the study are:

- (1) To describe the available information about the healing waters in the Romanian spas
- (2) To indicate which is the general image of the Romanian medical spas in the online environment (on the official websites of the resorts)
- (3) To propose solutions to increase the economic impact of healing waters on local communities.

Even though the Romanian medical spas are well developed in Romania, and there is a long tradition of their use for improving health, there is no strong marketing brand on the international market that could promote the Romanian spa potential in foreign countries. Romanian resorts with healing natural resources have high visibility on a local and national level only, mainly due to the use of spa therapies in the communist time as a usual complementary therapy. This approach limited their international visibility and makes it difficult to implement new procedures, including the management of water resources. In this regard, we wanted to investigate the online image of the medical spas in Romania and see their general profile that a tourist would discover online. Based on these results, we proposed a series of recommendations for a better valorization of the mineral and thermal waters in the Romanian medical spas.

At the beginning of the research, we noticed a lack of information at a national level regarding medical spas published by national bodies. The Ministry of Tourism, for instance, does not have a constant preoccupation for publishing annual up to date reports. Except for the Masterplan of Medical tourism, published in 2018 [89], there is no yearly analysis of the sector published in Romanian or English directly connected to the development of the Romanian spas. The available documents about the medical spas are mainly issued by the Romanian Association of Balneology with information about the medical spas in Romanian only. Relevant information is published by The Organization of Spa Owners in Romania with the official website in Romanian, English, French, and German [90] and by the National Institute of Recovery, Physical Medicine and Balneoclimatology with the official website only in Romanian [91]. Information regarding the medical spas and the healing waters are also available on the National House of Public Pensions (information available in Romanian only) [92] and contains information regarding the treatment vouchers and legislation. Therefore, the most active body is the Romanian Association of Balneology, which is constantly active and edits one of the most visible academic journals, namely the *Balneo Research Journal*. The focus of the studies published in the journal is mainly on the physicochemical structure of the healing resources and the impact of spa treatments on human health.

Considering the lack of information regarding the Romanian spas' activity from a socio-economic point of view, we built the present research on primary data obtained from the official websites of the resorts included in the study, and from the scholarly articles available on Google Academic. The present paper describes the use of water resources in the most famous five spas in Romania, both from a medical and recreational point of view, to illustrate the potential economic impact of water resources in the Romanian medical spas on local communities. The research starts from the lists of the top 30 spas realized in 2018 by the Association of Balneology from Romania and takes into consideration for the analysis ten main criteria: the attractiveness of the resort, natural resources, human resources, the quality of services, developments policies and strategies, investments, promotion of the resort, credibility, public relations, involvement of the civil society [93].

To accomplish our main objective, the research design followed the following three steps (Table 1):

Table 1. Research design.

| Research Steps | Description of the Research Step | Data Source |
|---|---|--|
| (i) selection stage | We selected the first five medical spas from the lists of the 30 medical spas in Romania developed by the Romanian Association of Balneology. | -the Rank of medical spas in Romania developed by the Romanian Association of Balneology in 2018. |
| (ii) the primary data development | We analyzed the first five medical spas according to the scores recorded in 2018. We investigated the following two perspectives: the online presence of the resorts on their official website and the available information from secondary sources (scholarly articles) that tourists would find online. | -the official websites of the medical spas -the scholarly articles about each medical spa published in academic journals and presented at international conferences -the scholarly articles selected for the research are visible on Google Academic. The search process was conducted from the name of each resort and the selection process took into consideration the first four pages of results. |
| (iii) the design of our recommendations | Based on the available data regarding the use of water resources in Romanian spa tourism, we issued a series of recommendations that would help the field stakeholders acknowledge the need for a better valorization of the healing waters | -national legislation and existing models in European spas |

The five medical spas included in the study are Băile Felix-1 Mai, Techirghiol, Băile Tușnad, Sovata and Covasna. Every resort uses water resources for the treatment suitable to treat more than one condition in the same destination. Băile Tușnad is also famous for its mineral drinking waters. Apemin Tușnad S.A. has in its portfolio three brands: Tușnad, Izvorul Zânelor (The Fairy Spring) and Izvorul Ascuns (The Hidden Source). The resorts are located in different regions of the country (Figure 1): Băile Felix-1 Mai is situated in the Western part of the country; Sovata, Băile Tușnad and Covasna are located in the center of the country, and Techirghiol is situated in the south-eastern part of the country. The localization of the five resorts in the first places in the ranking of the Romanian Association of Balneology in different regions of the country suggests the image of the resorts is not dependent on their localization.

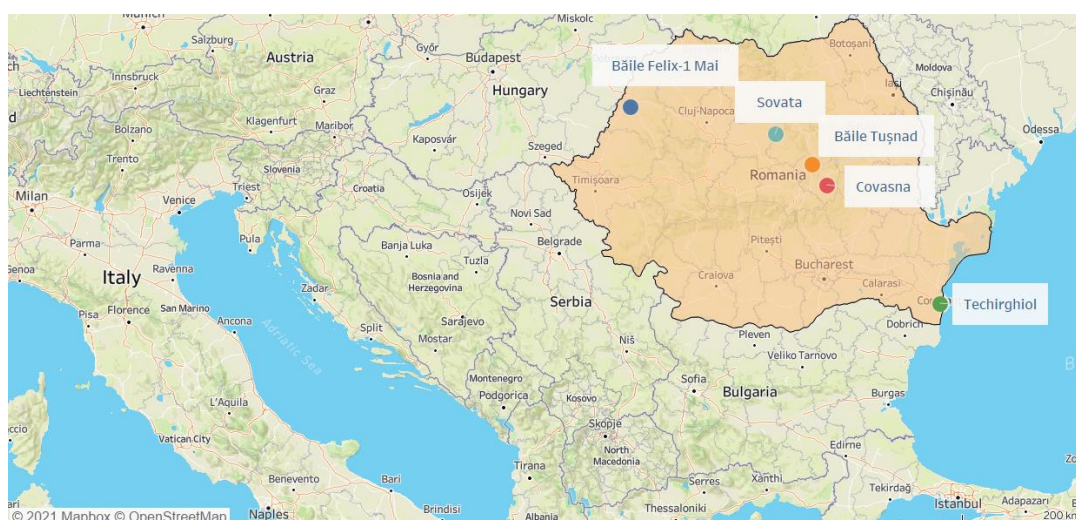


Figure 1. The map of the five Romanian resorts included in the study. Source: developed by the authors in Tableau Public software.

3. Results

The base of our research consisted of the first five Romanian Spas from the Romanian Association Rank 2018, taking into account the first selection stage (i) from the research design (Table 1). From the 30 resorts included in the rank, we wanted to investigate the first five spas, as their score were the highest and we considered them the most relevant.

The data interpretation regarding the online presence of the five resorts took into consideration the selection criteria from the “primary data development” stage of the research design (ii) illustrated in Table 1. We analyzed three main categories of information from the resort’s official websites: the website aspect, the available information about the waters in each resort and the keywords used to describe the spa therapies. To analyze the online information, we used the Qualitative Content Analysis method that allows to screen and interpret the text without a specific tool [94].

We considered the following aspects as indicators for a good website:

- picture quality—if the website used a picture with a dark background, an old image of the resort and had a low quality, we considered the general aspect of the webpage “poor”; if the website used dark pictures, with a low quality, but which illustrated the actual image of the resort, we considered the general aspect of the webpage “average”, and if the website used pictures taken by a professional, with professional lights and models to illustrate the tourists and to show the actual image of the resort, we considered the aspect of the webpage “high”
- responsiveness—we analyzed whether the website was responsive (yes/no), which meant that the content (text and images) adapts to different specific gadgets (desktop, smartphone, table)
- language—we checked if each webpage had the content available in other languages, except Romanian, and if it had more linguistic versions

In order to investigate the types of information posted on the official websites about water resources available in each resort, we took into account the HydrotherapySite classification particularities which describes the available therapies and other related services associated with wellness and the spa field [95]. We checked each description of the five resorts posted on their official website on different sections, such as Therapy&Spa/Treatment/The History of the Resort/Mineral Waters/Wellness after the keyword “water” and we included in Table 2 each association/description of it.

Table 2. The online image of the resorts selected for the study according to the information posted on the official websites.

| # | Medical SPA | Website Aspect | Info about the Waters | Keywords/Expressions Used for Hydrotherapy | Ref. |
|---|-------------------|---|---|--|------|
| 1 | Băile Felix-1 Mai | Content version: ro, en, de General aspect: high Responsive website: Yes | yes—type of waters, healing effects, recommendations. | the prize, recognition of the therapeutic qualities of the waters, miraculous effects of thermal water, thermal springs with miraculous effects, thermal spring, curative waters, SPA with thermal treatments, therapists. | [94] |
| 2 | Techirghiol | Content version: ro, General aspect: average Responsive website: Yes | yes—type of waters, healing effects, recommendations. | balneo—physical-kinetic treatment establishment, treatment of patients, place of treatment, salt water of the lake, therapeutic effect, chemical composition. | [96] |
| 3 | Băile Tuşnad | Content version: ro General aspect: average Responsive website: Yes | Yes—type of waters, healing effects, recommendations. | therapeutic effect, curative effects, treatment of cardiovascular, urinary, and nervous system diseases, cure, baths, treatment base. | [97] |
| 4 | Sovata | Content version: all (integrated with Google Translate) General aspect: average Responsive website: Yes | few information about the water from the lakes and recommendations. | Treatments, treatment packages, condition, prescription, medical procedures, baths. | [98] |
| 5 | Covasna | Content version: ro, General aspect: poor (an official common webpage for more resorts) Responsive website: Yes | few information about the type of the waters and recommendations. | spa procedures, hot baths with mineral hot waters, hydrotherapy, treatment base, ailments, treatments specific to a wide range of ailments, therapeutic factors. | [99] |

All five resorts included in the present study have a dedicated official website that contains relevant information regarding healing waters used in therapies, their effects in different conditions and recommendations. However, there is a distinct interest in promoting each resort online that can be seen from the quality and quantity of available information posted on each webpage (Table 2). Sovata and Covasna resorts, for instance, published very little information about the water used in treatments. By contrast, Băile Felix-1 Mai, Techirghiol and Băile Tuşnad offered detailed information about the waters and treatments, including details about the water effects in various conditions. It is also obvious the level of interest of each resort in attracting foreign tourists. Only Băile Felix-1 Mai website has the content available in languages other than Romanian (English and German), and Sovata has integrated the Google translation function. The other resorts have the content available only in Romanian.

From the analysis of the official websites of the resorts included in the study, the available information regarding the water resources refers to their therapeutic effects and links the water resources to the available therapies in each resort. Each resort has posted on the website details about the impact of water cures on health and their effects in treating a broad spectrum of conditions. The information is exposed mainly in Romanian (except Băile Felix-1 Mai), which indicated the resorts address the internal tourist market. We also noticed a lack of information about the drinking mineral waters available in the area (as is the case of Băile Tuşnad) or nearby. We also did not find information about health care products made with natural resources from the area (except the Gero vital products that are not linked to only one resort). Information about the leisure activities in the resort or nearby is present on each website. Still, the presentation of the touristic details is just descriptive, without having integrated dedicated augmented reality modules specific to the tourism field or short videos.

We also investigated the general image of each resort's website, including issues such as the quality of the images used, the attractiveness and actuality of the web design, and if the webpage is responsive or not. The five resorts' analysis revealed a high level of the website aspect in only one case, Băile Felix-1 Mai. In three cases, Techirghiol, Băile Tuşnad and Sovata, the web page aspect is average, and in one case, Covasna, the general aspect is poor, with low quality images used and with little information posted about the resort (Table 3).

Table 3. The information about the resorts according to the published studies in the field.

| # | Medical SPA | Main Available Information |
|---|-------------------|---|
| 1 | Băile Felix-1 Mai | The available information about Băile Felix-1 Mai in the scholarly articles refers to the year when the resort was established and about the quality of the waters that registered international recognition in 1986 [100]. The resort is also described through its unique thermal waters and also targets young families [101,102] with a wellness offer, but not is mature enough to be distinguished through its vision [103]. The accommodation structure of the resort is also described as classical [104], in general built before 1989 [105]. |
| 2 | Techirghiol | The studies about Techirghio resort approach subjects such as its first certification in the 16th century and the quality of the water from the Techirghiol Lake are used in the balneotherapy [106], being considered as having unique healing properties in Romania [107]. According to the published studies, the activity of the resort is connected to the Balneal and Rehabilitation Sanatorium of Techirghiol, which is open all year round [108]. According to Almasan et al. (2018), the resort has a solid marketing strategy that attracts tourists [109]. |
| 3 | Băile Tuşnad | The scholarly articles about Băile Tuşnad approach subjects such as the quality of the mineral waters used in the balneotherapy [110,111], the series of conditions that can be treated in the resort [112], and the prevention effects in various diseases of the healing waters [113]. There are also details regarding the accommodation structure in the resort [114]. |
| 4 | Sovata | Sovata resort is described in the selected scholarly articles from the point of view of the quality of the waters and the conditions that can be treated there [115]. It is also described as a destination for balneology [113] established between the two World Wars [114]. |
| 5 | Covasna | The information about Covasna resort that is available in the scholarly articles includes details about the quality of the water used in balneology [116–118] and about the available treatments [119] that can be used in a series of conditions [120]. |

Regarding the keywords used by each resort describing its balneotherapy activity online, we noticed that all the keywords/expressions used are from the area of balneotherapy. We observed that each resort described its activity using a common word, mainly "treatment". Other used words are: "therapeutic qualities", "therapeutic effect", "curative effect" and "medical procedures".

To analyze the information published in the selected scholarly articles for the present study, we read the descriptions of the healing water resources available in each of the five resorts, synthetizing the information in Table 3. The results show that, as in the case of the information posted on the official websites of the resorts, the details can be placed in the same main category: details regarding the use of the healing waters in different treatment procedures. The selected published papers do not investigate the opportunity of water management implementation in the resorts or the necessary steps in building a resort brand. Therefore, a potential tourist in one of the five resorts would find online mainly information from the medical area analysis of the tourist infrastructure (especially accommodation).

4. Discussion

The study of the water resources used in the five resorts included in the research: Băile Felix-1 Mai, Techirghiol, Băile Tuşnad, Sovata and Covasna revealed the available information in the online environment is from the same area. There are published details mainly about the therapeutic effects of the waters and their use for centuries. The results

obtained consists of the basis for our recommendations for the spa's representatives in order to improve their online presence and their communication regarding water management. Our recommendations are based on the available data regarding the therapeutic water resources obtained through the literature review and relies on the existing spa models in other European destinations, following the third stage of the research design (iii).

According to our investigation results, we noticed a gap of information regarding the water management in each resort, and about the water resources valorization. In the context of the need to protect water resources due to climate change effects and limited quantities of mineral and thermal waters, we consider the implementation of water management systems in each resort a necessity. As water waste occurs at different stages of tourist activity, each resort should indicate the efforts made by each stakeholder to mitigate the wasted water, including the treatment bases representatives, hotel managers, local authorities, and tourists.

In this context, we considered it essential to develop the present study to highlight the current state of the main five medical spas in Romania, according to the Romanian Association of Balneology Rank. The profile of the analyzed spas should be a starting point for their representatives to improve their online appearance and to start focusing on the water management, both as implementation and as communication to the general public. A consequent message on their website about the importance of saving water resources would represent an important awareness campaign that would help tourists to understand the need for reaction. Moreover, considering the actual climate change issue that is impacting the tourism sector also, water protection becomes a necessity and spa tourism should be one of the initiators as its activity relies on this resource.

The results of the study show that information about water management is not included on the official websites of the Romanian resorts included in the analysis, as there is no information regarding the need to mitigate the wasted water. The necessity to implement specific systems to diminish the quantity of wasted water in the treatment base, or in the accommodation unit is not communicated to the public, which has limited the awareness degree among guests in terms of reducing water loss. The results of the study indicate the resorts' websites contain information about the therapeutic use of the waters and their historical use and focus mainly on the recovery effect of the waters in each resort.

The results also show the differences in web design quality and communication in other languages than Romanian. The actual image of the Romanian spas included in the analysis indicates a lack of information unity between the resorts, even though they are ranked as the main five medical spas in Romania, according to the Romanian Association of Balneology. Their image, as it was presented at the time of the study, indicates the resorts are mainly targeting intern tourists (except Băile Felix-1 Mai) and are focusing on the national market that is aware of the resorts and the curative effects of the waters and is checking online only for general information. The only resort that is presenting its offer to international tourists is Băile Felix-1 Mai.

Due to the dependence of spa activity on the healing waters, the lack of information about water management is a weak point for the medical spas included in the study, as their curative effects are the main driver for the Romanian tourists to choose such a destination. The focus on national tourists, a tendency that is visible on the spa's websites, diminishes the visibility of the Romanian spas internationally and delays the modernization process of the resorts, as Romanian tourists are still connecting spa tourism with social tourism.

The lack of awareness campaigns on the official websites about the importance of protecting the mineral and thermal waters reveals the necessary action points in this direction. Educating stakeholders in waste management is possible with the help of awareness campaigns, so more efforts in this regard are needed. Therefore, we recommend each resort post on the official website include information about waste management implementation.

The study results also indicate a lack of interest in promoting medical spas as offering differentiated services. Except for the information about the unicity of the natural resources,

there is no local brand that would help the tourists identify the Romanian spas as having a unique offer. In the selected scholarly articles, the focus of the research was on the same direction. The published studies approach subjects such as the tourist infrastructure or the medical qualities of the water resources. In this context, we recommend each resort to focus on building its brand and promoting online through differentiating elements e.g., Facebook, Youtube, Tripadvisor, online travel agencies, etc.

The synergy between the mineral and thermal waters for both bathing and drinking and the possibility of developing new brands of healthcare products that contain the natural resources from the resort would boost the economy of local communities. The medical spas representatives should consider the profile of the tourists who are looking for new experiences and prefer local products during their holiday. Even though the tourists who choose the Romanian medical spas have as a primary motivation the health status improvement, there are the same aspects that influence their general impression about a destination. As the Romanian medical spas do not focus on branding their healing waters on an international scale, there is enough room to improve their visibility and build a national brand. Romanian spa tourism has the potential to attract foreign tourists, especially from neighbouring countries, if they focus on turning the water resources into a national symbol.

Based on the published information available online on the official websites of the resorts included in the study, and the selected scholarly articles, we concluded that there is no new approach to using water resources in the Romanian spas. The localization of each of the five resorts near ecotourist areas allows the concept of rural wellbeing tourism to be suitable for the Romanian spas. The adaptation of such a concept to the particularities of the Romanian offer would increase the resorts' economic development and attract new tourists with higher incomes that would allow them to pay the entire price for the services, in contrast to the tourists who pay with treatment vouchers.

5. Conclusions

Through the present study, we wanted to illustrate the online image of the five most important medical spas in Romania, regarding the available information about water resources used in each resort. We also wanted to emphasize the need for better communication between spa's representatives and tourists about the issues that natural resources are facing nowadays, and about the water management necessity. We focused our research on online information, as the online profile of a resort is the main contact between the tourists and the spa services and the information available online could represent a decision factor for each guest of the resort. As the decision-making process in tourism is nowadays dependent on online information, we also focused on the online image of the resorts. The present study is based on the qualitative analysis of online content available on the official websites of the five main spa resorts in Romania: Băile Felix-1 Mai, Techirghiol, Băile Tuşnad, Sovata and Covasna, and on the description of the healing waters uses available in the scholarly articles from Google Scholar. The website's content analysis took into consideration the website description of the quality of pictures used, the online content availability in foreign languages, and if the website is responsive or not, in order to illustrate the type of information provided to the general public by the resorts' representatives. The website analysis and the content of the articles that approached the study of the five resorts included in the research was conducted by considering the Qualitative Content Analysis method and the HydrotherapySite classification. We accomplished this step to have a better description of the online image of the five resorts. By investigating the words/expressions associated with the "water" keyword, we could conclude which is the main focus of the resorts representatives regarding online communication, and which is the main gap in this regard.

Water represents one of the main resources in tourism, and in the case of spa tourism, it represents the product itself. As its role is not evident in all stages of the tourist services, additional initiatives are necessary to raise awareness among tourists and the sector repre-

representatives to protect water resources and assure the future exploitation of the resources. Romania is one of the countries with a wide range of water resources with healing effects, which are used in different spa therapies. However, water resources must meet several criteria to be suitable for spa therapies and in this context, water sources should be protected. In this regard, spa representatives should find solutions to mitigate the wasted quantities of waters and to assure tourists are also informed about the necessity of water management. The present article also has several limitations suggesting the need for more research in this area. The first limitation concerns the limited number of resorts included in the study. We analyzed the information available for five of the 30 resorts included in the Rank issued by the Romanian Association of Balneology. For a more comprehensive image of the general details in the online environment about water resources in Romanian spas, it is also necessary to investigate other spas and consider more primary sources to complete our analyses. Secondly, the research resumes the selected primary data: official websites of the resorts and a selection of scholarly articles and proceedings included in the Google Scholar database. To create a more complex image and propose more detailed recommendations, we intend to include in our future research interviews with tourist representatives. The in-depth discussions with stakeholders from the spa field would help us give more accurate recommendations about the water management system that could be implemented in each resort.

As the approached subject is a complex one and Romania has not focused on protecting its therapeutic water resources, the present study marks the beginning of more detailed research about water management implementation in Romanian medical spas. We will continue the current research and, based on the obtained results, we will start to create a dialogue between the Academia and medical spas representatives to raise awareness about the benefits of water management systems and the necessity of good communication to the public regarding the water management in each resort.

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