Between digital and physical identities: Uses of ICT by Greek spa establishments as points for analysing perceptions of cultural heritage and economic development

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Abstract:

The paper deals with some examples of ICT use by spa establishments in northern Greece in comparison to the spas’ actual situation and development potential. Particular emphasis is put on how thermalism and cultural heritage are perceived, represented and promoted in the spas’ websites, and on how the comparison between the spas’ digital and physical identities reveals challenges that lie at the core of thermalism development in a time of economic crisis and paradigm change in communication, cure and recreation.

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Peer-review under responsibility of organizing committee of the scientific committee of the international conference; ICTT 2016

Keywords: Thermalism, thermal springs, curative tourism, wellness tourism, cultural heritage, cultural identity, digital identity, development strategies

Introduction

In this paper we will try to analyse the importance of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in shaping an “identity” for Greek thermal destinations and, subsequently, to show some aspects of how the very concept of thermal tourism as a category of cultural tourism is affected and transformed by the use of ICT (Katsoni, 2015).

We will deal with three of the most important thermal centres in northern Greece and we will compare their digital identity to their actual situation, prospects and development strategies, as regards both their specific cultural heritage and their choices between reproducing and adapting to current attitudes and practices in order to maintain and/or raise their economic potential. The relevant fieldwork was carried out in August 2016 in the framework of the Erasmus project Cultour+.

I

In the brave new world of ICT things can often be misleading. The print screen shown in plate 1 is not taken from an escort service

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Original article at: http://ijoaict.inbie.pl/1-1/between-digital.pdf
website, but from the one of Apollonia Spa, the thermal establishment by the Lake Volvi in northern Greece.\textsuperscript{2} When we visited the place in August 2016, instead of the ethereal beings who haunt the spa’s website (plate 2) we met charming old ladies like the one on plate 3 who slowly walks down the road on her way to a thermal treatment subsidized by a social tourism programme. As for the spa’s facilities, they were surely not as glossy as suggested by the website (plate 4) but rather in need of improvement and restoration (plate 5), while advertised wellness services like massage, reflexology treatment and sauna (plate 6) are rarely sought after by the elderly clientele.

However, the spa is not at all dysfunctional. During our tour, in which we were escorted by the spa’s manager, we couldn’t help but feel an atmosphere of community and human warmth. Wherever we went, eyes opened wide to the sight of us (being both unknown and relatively young), while some old ladies took the opportunity for a small talk with the manager. Later, at the restaurant where we sat for some refreshment and a discussion on the spa’s identity and prospects, an old gentleman insisted on buying the manager a beer; at the nearby tables people were exchanging in friendly but animated tones their views on the political situation. What is more, the spa’s management has a very clear view on what is indispensable for running a thermal establishment: contrary to the luxury wellness hotel “Galini” in the spa town of Kamena Vourla in Central Greece, which in fact focuses more on beauty and fitness than on thermalism (Papageorgiou & Beriatos, 2011), and, according to our discussion with the staff, does not provide for any medical treatment before a bath in the thermal springs, Apollonia Spa offers thermal expertise and medical examination and advice to its clientele.

In the case of Apollonia Spa, the use of ICT, instead of enhancing the thermal establishment’s potential as a tourist destination, sends wrong messages and reveals strategic weaknesses (Mariani et al., 2014). In simple words, the spa’s website conveys an image that does not correspond to reality. This discrepancy, easily demonstrable by a short visit, can contribute to undermining the aims inherent in the digital presentation (namely, the expanding of the clientele into younger audiences) and sooner or later work in the opposite direction. As a matter of fact, the discrepancy is evident in the rather low visitors’ evaluation of the place on the relevant TripAdvisor webpage.\textsuperscript{3} On the other hand, the website does not focus on the spa’s comparative advantages, namely the staff’s know-how and the prevailing communal atmosphere. In addition, it fails to include the spa in an integrated frame of places to visit and things to do in the region. Although the website hosts a section on the nearby Lake Volvi (plate 7), it does not provide any concrete information (or even hyperlinks) on activities concerning the natural environment, such as swimming, trekking, cycling, birdwatching etc. Only a few words are devoted to the surviving old Ottoman bath (plate 8), a few kilometres from the spa, in a very small section on the history of thermalism in the area. This is a pity, since the

\textsuperscript{2}Apollonia Spa, http://www.apollonia-spa.gr/ (last retrieved on October 12, 2016).

information contained in this section is really well-documented, based by scholarly research (Vingopoulou-Papazotou, 1989-1990), and makes one beg for more.

Of course, part of the above is due to the lack of a holistic, transversal approach of cultural and environmental tourism (Franquesa & Morell, 2011) that, one would argue, is simply beyond the capacities of the spa’s management. However, the biggest shareholder in the company that owns the spa – and the body that in fact runs the establishment – is the Municipality of Volvi, a public authority that should play an important role in planning strategies for local touristic promotion. The digital presentation of Apollonia Spa highlights eloquently the contradictions in the formation of an identity for thermal centres in a wider cultural environment and in a period of acute crisis and developmental dilemmas. We will return to this point later.

II

Now we will move from the shores of Lake Volvi to the outskirts of Thessaloniki, in the small town of Langadas, one of the most well-known thermal centres in northern Greece that has been hit hard by Greece’s financial and economic crisis. From the many lodging facilities that used to operate in the town there is left only one hotel, which offers poor services and accommodation.

When we visited the Baths of Langadas, at a small distance from the town, we discovered that the place was actually much more pleasant, welcoming and well-kept than its digital counterpart from the Baths’ website. In the section “Pictures” of the website, the webpage displays some unimaginative boxes with the names of the thermal pools (plate 9). If the visitor clicks on the respective boxes, a series of not particularly clear pictures appear, sometimes in an eerie light that does not forebode anything pleasant (plate 10). Nowhere is anyone to be seen, visitor or staff; this, together with the coldness of the colours and the detachment from any emotional warmth, makes the place look strangely abandoned (plate 11). Sometimes, the webpages remind of a notice board at the entrance of some big public building, a fact demonstrating a gross misunderstanding of the potential and the function of ICT (plate 12). As for any information concerning other things to do and other places to see in the area, it is simply lacking. Even the history of the Baths of Langadas since their exploitation in the 1920’s and their connection with the development of Thessaloniki is not covered at all.

And yet, the place is lovely, well-kept and efficiently managed. There is a big open space between the facilities nicely arranged with trees, pathways, a café and a playground for children (plate 13). Two of the establishment’s thermal pools are actually renovated Byzantine baths, one dating to the 9th and the other to the 14th century, while at the one side of the open space there is the hotel “Megas Alexandros” (plate 14), a splendid example of modernist mid-war architecture. The hotel is out of operation and the Municipality of Langadas, to which the thermal establishment belongs, is looking for an investor.

Like Apollonia Spa, the Baths of Langadas offer to the visitors medical advice and thermal expertise. However, their clientele is

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different. Instead of social tourism groups, the Baths of Langadas are focusing on the middle strata of nearby Thessaloniki. After all, the small town was a thermal centre for Thessaloniki’s bourgeoisie already in the mid-war period. The emphasis is now put on a combination of spa and wellness services (e.g. aromatherapy, jacuzzi) and on a relative detachment from strictly medical thermalism (Papageorgiou, 2009: 224-229). However, the Baths’ strong points, attested also in the largely positive evaluation in TripAdvisor, are not actually evident in the spa’s digital identity as conveyed by its website; nor is its potential to evolve into a centre for multiple tourist activities.

On the other hand, the management of the Baths is quite extrovert in what concerns alternative forms of ICT use. Apart from the website, there is a rich and regularly updated Facebook account (plate 15), full of pictures from various events that have taken place in the premises. Few of them, however, have to do directly with bathing in the thermal springs and as such do not add much to the identity of the place as a thermal centre (plate 16); still, the account’s role in promoting the Baths as a meeting place for a multitude of events as concerts, exhibitions etc. should not be underestimated.

We think that a comparison between the websites of Apollonia Spa and the Baths of Langadas is fruitful for our discussion and that it could lead also to other analytical insights. Both establishments are managed by municipal authorities; both have experienced the overwhelming results of the financial and economic crisis that led to the collapse of state-supported thermalism and to its rather poor substitution by the inclusion of thermal bathing in isolated social tourism programmes; what is more, both establishments try to cope with the crucial issue “curative thermalism versus wellness services” (Naraindas & Bastos, 2011; Weisz, 2011). How comes ICT into this nexus?

The pretentiousness of Apollonia Spa’s website shows an urgency for the widening of the establishment’s operations within an ill-conceived strategic analysis that treats ICT as old-school advertisement. On the other hand, the digital presence of the Baths of Langadas displays a bureaucratic tick-box attitude that conveys a sense of self-sufficiency. Both digital presentations fail to stress out the strong points of the respective spas in a way that would attract potential visitors while staying true to the identity of the places. In addition, and this is rather telling, both websites do not have an English version, as if attracting non-Greeks were a superfluous effort.

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In short, we think that the use of ICT in the realm of Greek thermal establishments reveals approaches and contradictions that lie at the core of thermalism development. An institution that plays a crucially supportive role in promoting and monitoring municipal spa centres all over Greece is the Hellenic Association of Municipalities with Thermal Springs (HAMTS). In its website, the Association provides very useful information on the thermal establishments of Greece and presents them one by one in an integrated and much more measured way, while it also provides query possibilities according to geographical place and specific ailment (plate 17). A great part of the website’s content, particularly the informative one, is available also in English, German and Russian, even if the quality of the translations is often questionable. This is an important step towards a balanced and cooperative effort that would use creatively the possibilities of ICT.

In fact, an important aspect of ICT is its role in displaying and supporting cooperation networks. This has been put to use in the website of the European Historic Thermal Towns Association (EHTTA), as evident in the formation of a European Route of Historical and Thermal Towns (plate 18). The Association’s latest project is called “Thermal Atlas”; according to Giuseppe Bellandi, the president of EHTTA, the project “can become the best available database about European thermal heritage and a prime source of information, easily available for the general public”.9

One of the few Greek members of EHTTA is the establishment of the Mud Baths of Krinides near the city of Kavala in northeastern Greece. This is in itself a sign of extroversion. In the following analysis we will see whether this is verified in the Mud Baths’ digital identity, whether this digital identity conforms to the actual situation of the establishment, and what all these can tell us on how the Mud Baths’ role and prospects are being conceptualized.

**IV**

First, the website is in its totality available also in an English version, a fact that supports our extroversion hypothesis and stands in gross contrast with the digital identity of Apollonia’s and Langadas’s establishments, which we examined above.10 Second, the Mud Baths’ website is particularly informative on the properties of the natural substance that is being used (plate 19). Of course, this is also due to the fact that mud bathing is not everybody’s taste and might require some explanation as to how splashing naked in a pool of mud, usually associated with dirt and sliminess, can contribute to health and well-being. Nevertheless, the relevant section is squarely placed within the overall architecture of the website and, without taking refuge in medical jargon, is composed in a matter-of-fact and yet user-friendly tone. In the text it is explicitly stated that “it is important to obey to the instructions of the consulting physician in order to have a successful re-

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In other words, wellness expectations are indeed allowed, particularly as to skin cleansing, but not without medical advice.

Third, and most telling, the website displays an entirely different approach of thermalism than the ones we have encountered so far. Mud bathing is presented as a collective experience that is open to all, young and old, ailing and healthy, comfort- and wellness-seeking alike (plate 20). Side by side in the pool and covered in therapeutic mud, the visitors are transformed into a healing community of equals (plate 21). In contrast to understanding thermalism as a product that must be over-personalized in order to be promoted within a competitive economic arena, the Mud Baths of Krinides are exploiting creatively the historical and cultural potential of thermalism as a collective and healing procedure. Nowhere are pictures of beautiful girls in minimal clothing or clinically clean spaces devoid of human presence; instead, the pictures of mud-covered humans bring thermalism back to the basics, that is, to a rich and shared perception of one’s body.

The photographs are loaded on Flickr, a fact that contributes to the Mud Baths’ visibility in an online community framework. A similar attitude is displayed in the website’s section on accommodation (plate 22). The presentation of all lodging facilities near the Mud Baths, municipal and private, forms a cluster of public and private enterprises that can be used for mutual benefit. According to the study on the impact of European Cultural Routes on SMEs’ innovation and competitiveness, which was jointly launched by the European Commission and the Council of Europe in 2010, the role of the public sector in fostering and supporting creative clusters of small and medium-sized enterprises along cultural routes is particularly important. In the case of Krinides, we cannot actually talk about particularly innovative enterprises; still, this cooperative attitude under municipal guidance is a good start that can acquire wider participation and prospects.

As for exploiting the potential of holistic tourism, the Mud Baths’ website offers a section on sightseeing that focuses on the archaeological site of nearby Philippi (plate 23), which has been recently included in UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Monuments. Despite the brevity and poor documentation of the section (no hyperlink to the website of the archaeological site is provided), this interest could serve as a starting point for a strategic planning on the mutual development of thermal, religious, and cultural-archaeological tourism: after all, the ancient city of Filippi was visited by St Paul in his travels, and was the seat of one of the first Christian Churches in Europe.

It is particularly important that the digital identity of the Mud Baths conforms to the actual situation of the establishment (plate 24). The Mud Baths, run by a municipal company (Municipality of Kavala), are in very good condition; apart from the mud pool, there is a very beautiful Ottoman bath that has been restored and renovated as a

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hydrotherapy facility (plate 25). The area is functional, welcoming and relatively well-visited. While the number of visitors has been severely reduced since 2009, the blow has not been as hard as elsewhere, a fact due largely to the good cooperation between the municipality and the local society.

The municipality has applied for a fund from the Greek National Strategic Reference Framework for the construction of a vaulted roof over the pool, so that the spa can operate all-year round. For the time being, most of the visitors are supported by social tourism programmes, while there are also some wellness tourists. Many visitors seem to be well-acquainted with the place and to have developed a sense of community, a fact reinforced by the presence of a municipal camping that creates small “neighbourhoods” in the area it occupies. In general, the Mud Baths of Krinides present a balanced example of popular curative thermalism that is now widening the scope of its clientele.

V

The use of ICT reveals some of the most crucial issues concerning the development of thermalism in Greece in a time of crisis. In our case, the fact that all three establishments we examined are run by municipal authorities and face similar difficulties is characteristic for the convergences and deviations we noted above. Indeed, the way the three establishments construct their digital presence, together with the comparison between their digital and physical identity, underlines different perceptions on thermalism and its development: curative thermalism versus wellness services; social thermalism versus individual visitors; thermalism as advertised product versus thermalism as process and common experience. This, in its turn, reflects different strategies on overall development and cultural tourism as envisaged by local authorities, while bringing forth the role of network- and cluster-building in a time of reduced public spending.

What could be said in the way of preliminary conclusions is, first, that some things do not need to be seen as totally incompatible: neither social thermalism has to be below quality standards nor wellness has to be as exclusive and “individualistic” as lifestyle discourse would have us believe. The notions of healing and community, we think, as well as the active enhancement of thermalism as a popular European cultural habitus that goes back to classical antiquity (Yegül, 1992; Ergin, 2011; Lucore & Trümper, 2012; Walton, 2014) can play a role in a synthesis between expectations coming from different socio-cultural groups.

Second, thermalism must be linked to other forms of cultural and environmental tourism in a holistic approach that, apart from economic development in a direction of “local branding”, may fuel processes of reconstructing, negotiating and sharing identities on the digital and the physical level (Smith & Robinson, 2006).

Third, there is no point in “pretending an identity into existence” as if it were an object to be desired and consumed (Apter, 1999: 134). Knowing who we are is a process of constant interaction with the others. The effective use of ICT for understanding and presenting the historical emergence and evolution of thermalism in Europe, as well as for constructing cooperation networks, clusters and routes, could contribute to finding out
one’s strong points, to anchoring them in one’s historical and cultural experience, and to combining them with the others’ in a fair division of labour. This, in its turn, could lead to an iterative process between physical and digital identity, between being and becoming, between cure and wellness, which, in the end, would go back to the basics: people finding relief and joy in thermal bathing like their predecessors used to do for so many centuries, and people providing them with this opportunity in fair and sustainable terms.

Plates:

**Plate 1:** From the website of Apollonia Spa

Source: http://www.apollonia-spa.gr/newsite/?page_id=74

**Plate 2:** From the website of Apollonia Spa

Source: http://www.apollonia-spa.gr/newsite/?page_id=74

**Plate 3:** At Apollonia Spa, August 22, 2016

Source: Photo by the authors

**Plate 4:** From the website of Apollonia Spa

Source: http://www.apollonia-spa.gr/newsite/?page_id=74
Plate 5: At Apollonia Spa, August 22, 2016
Source: Photo by the authors

Plate 6: From the website of Apollonia Spa: Advertised wellness services
Source: http://www.apolloniaspa.gr/newsite/?page_id=95

Plate 7: From the website of Apollonia Spa: Lake Volvi
Source: http://www.apolloniaspa.gr/newsite/?page_id=14

Plate 8: From the website of Apollonia Spa: The Ottoman bath
Source: http://www.apolloniaspa.gr/newsite/?page_id=14
Plate 9: From the website of the Baths of Langadas

Source: http://www.loutralamnas.gr/%CF%86%CF%89%CE%BF%CE%B3%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%86%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%85%CE%B0%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8C/

Plate 10: From the website of the Baths of Langadas: Pool “Mygdonia”

Source: http://www.loutralamnas.gr/%CE%B4%CE%B5%CE%B1%CE%BC%CE%B5%CE%AE%CE%BA%CE%BF%CF%81%CF%8E%CE%BD%CE%B5%CE%B1/

Plate 11: From the website of the Baths of Langadas: Pool “Koroneia”

Source: http://www.loutralamnas.gr/%CE%B4%CE%B5%CE%B1%CE%BC%CE%B5%CE%AE%CE%BA%CE%BF%81%CF%8E%CE%BD%CE%B5%CE%B9%CE%B1/

Plate 12: From the website of the Baths of Langadas: Wellness services

Source: http://www.loutralamnas.gr/%CF%86%CF%81%CF%BF%CF%BD%CF%AF%CE%B1/
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Plate 13: At the Baths of Langadas, August 22, 2016: The garden and the café

Source: Photo by the authors

Plate 14: At the Baths of Langadas, August 22, 2016: Hotel “Megas Alexandros”

Source: Photo by the authors

Plate 15: Facebook account of the Baths of Langadas

Source: https://el-gr.facebook.com/loutralagada/

Plate 16: Meeting of lovers of vintage Volkswagen models at the Baths of Langadas

Source: https://el-gr.facebook.com/loutralagada/
**Plate 17:** Map and query tool of Greek thermal establishments, from the website of the Hellenic Association of Municipalities with Thermal Springs


**Plate 18:** Map of the European Route of Historic Thermal Towns, from the website of the European Historic Thermal Towns Association


**Plate 19:** Properties of therapeutic clay, from the website of the Mud Baths of Krinides

Source: http://www.piloterapia.gr/index2.html

**Plate 20:** Visitors at the Mud Baths of Krinides

Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/8300107@N05/show
Plate 21: The pool at the Mud Baths of Krinides

Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/38300107@N05/show

Plate 22: The section on accommodation from the website of the Mud Baths of Krinides

Source: http://www.pilotherapia.gr/index2.html

Plate 23: Ancient Philippi, from the website of the Mud Baths of Krinides

Source: http://www.pilotherapia.gr/index2.html

Plate 24: At the Mud Baths of Krinides, August 23, 2016

Source: Photo by the authors
Plate 25: At the Mud Baths of Krinides, August 23, 2016: The Ottoman bath

Source: Photo by the author

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Received: June 22, 2016. Accepted: November 16, 2016. Online Published: December 18, 2016
URL: http://ijoaict.inbie.pl