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**Women's Conceptualizations of Spa Visits:
Something Just for Me**

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Abstract

This study explores women's conceptualizations of their spa visits, the meaning the spa holds for women, and their motivations to visit. Our study employs a qualitative methodology, using Grounded Theory. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 spa customers living in the Northeastern United States. All interviews were taped and field notes were taken. Transcripts were coded and examined for emerging themes, which were then compared to extant theory. Results of our study illuminated three key meanings that women ascribed to their spa visits: Identity Formation, Resistance Against the 'Ethic of Caring,' and Friendship Building. Managerial implications are discussed.

Key words: spa, women, leisure, identity, relationships

Women's Conceptualizations of Spa Visits: Something Just for Me

Introduction

The formal study of women's leisure is a relatively new endeavor. It is only since the early 1980's that gender has been a key factor in the study of leisure, and since that time, our understanding of the elements of women's leisure that differentiate it from that of men has grown exponentially (Henderson, 1996; Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002; Henderson & Hickerson, 2007). As this divergence unfolded, researchers began to attempt to elucidate the 'meaning' of women's leisure. However, in the mid-1990's, (Henderson, 1996) called for a broader framework – an understanding of and appreciation for multiple 'meanings.' She challenged scholars to expand the definitions and comprehensions of women's leisure by exploring the issue through a diverse set of circumstances, contexts, participants, and theoretical frameworks (Henderson, 1996). The present study is executed in answer to that call. To date, no scholarly research has attempted to explore women's conceptualizations of their visits to the spa, the meaning the spa holds for women, or their motivation to visit. In an era when spa usage is seeing growth in staggering proportions, this question presents itself as relevant and engaging.

Our study employs a qualitative methodology, using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; A. L. Strauss, 2001) to explicate the meanings that women assign to their visits to the spa. Qualitative methods are effective and preferred for nascent areas of research, and this method was chosen for this study due to the dearth of previous research on the topic (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Interviews afforded the women a voice to tell their stories in their own language. The resulting thick description and personal narratives give a context to this research which can only be achieved through such methods. By telling their story here, we hope to discover how women conceptualize their spa experiences, to uncover the meanings they ascribe to these visits, and to elucidate the relevance of spa visits to women's lives.

The American Spa Industry

"I would go to the spa every week, if I could!" This sentiment, expressed by a 53-year-old participant, seems to echo the wishes of women everywhere. Indeed, the unprecedented growth of the spa industry would seem to indicate that women are doing their best to visit spas as often as possible. According to the International Spa Association, in 2008 the U.S. saw 160 million unique spa visits, resulting in total revenue of \$12.8 billion dollars. There are currently 21,300 spa locations in the United States alone (International Spa Association, 2009).

While these numbers are staggering, more notable is the remarkable growth in the spa industry over the previous decade. Since 1999, the number of spa locations has risen steadily, from 4,143 in 1999 to 21,307 locations in 2008. Industry revenues have tripled in the last decade, growing from \$4.2 billion in 1999 to \$12.8 billion in 2008. The number of unique spa visits has risen from 69 million in 1999 to 160 million in 2008 (International Spa Association, 2009).

Clearly, customers are patronizing spas, and doing so often. In an effort to understand this phenomenon, it is useful to know who these patrons are. Approximately 25% of Americans have visited a spa. While spa usage among men is increasing, 69% of spa customers are female. The average age of typical spa customers is mid-40's, and they have generally been going to spas for more than one year, but less than 9 years. These women hold college degrees (81%) and have an average household income of above \$50,000 (International Spa Association, 2006). They visit local day spas most often, followed by resort and hotel spas.

While these statistics are useful in understanding who the spa patron is, they stop short of explaining why they visit spas. The number of spa visits and the revenue figures would indicate that visiting the spa is important to the American woman, and has become increasingly important over the last decade. However, a search of the

literature reveals almost nothing regarding the motivation of women to visit the spa. While most would agree that going to a spa is a pleasurable experience, the numbers would indicate that there may be a more compelling reason for women to spend time and money engaging in spa activities. Research indicates that while young women enter the spa world as they hit their early 30's, older women continue their patronage (International Spa Association, 2006). Thus, it is clear that women are finding value in spa experiences, and that this value continues as they age, creating loyal customers of them.

The present study attempts to shed light on these issues. In particular, we are interested in discovering how women conceptualize their spa experiences, what motivates them to go, and what meanings women find in their visits to the spa. Answers to these questions will contribute to the industry by illuminating the factors that motivate women to visit the spa, giving hospitality managers and marketers relevant information to use as they craft marketing campaigns and service strategies. This study also attempts to contribute to theory by exploring the meaning of spa leisure experiences for women, thereby adding a unique dimension to the women's leisure literature. Thus, we put forth our research questions:

- RQ1: How do women conceptualize their spa experiences, and what motivates them to go?
- RQ2: What meanings do women find in their spa visits?

Methods

Because a complete understanding of how women conceptualize the spa and the reasons that they visit does not yet exist, qualitative methods were employed for this study. Qualitative methods are recognized as particularly appropriate for exploration of fields that are not yet fully understood (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

In particular, Grounded Theory was employed to analyze the data resulting from this study. Grounded theory utilizes systematically obtained and analyzed data to generate theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; A. L. Strauss, 2001). This method involves deriving theoretical categories through the process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), during which the researcher compares the gathered data with each other and with emerging concepts (Barnes, 1996). Similarities and differences are noted, underlying themes are identified, and theoretical categories are derived that can help shed light on the phenomenon under study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As these categories are defined and relationships between them emerge, these relationships may then serve as propositions that may be tested empirically in future studies (Rosenbaum, 2006).

Sampling Plan

Interviews were conducted with 4 spa customers living in the Northeastern United States. Ages ranged from 39 to 66, and all customers were Caucasian females. While males and minorities are a growing segment of spa patrons, the scope of this study was confined to female Caucasians, as they represent the vast majority of American spa consumers. Customers were identified through the use of snowball sampling, through friends and colleagues of the first author. Requirements for participation were that the participant must have, at some point in their lives, experienced some type of salon services (hair or nails) and have experienced some type of spa service (massage, facial, body treatment). Potential subjects were identified, contacted, and invited to participate in an interview. A table of participants is seen below:

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>
AO	Female	47	Caucasian
LA	Female	66	Caucasian
DC	Female	53	Caucasian
KT	Female	39	Caucasian

Data Collection

Individual, semi-structured Interviews were conducted with participants. All interviews were taped and field notes were taken during the interviews for corroboration. See Appendix A for a full list of interview questions.

Data Analysis

During data analysis, transcripts were first coded using an open coding technique (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Transcriptions of the taped interviews and field notes were imported into NVIVO 8 for coding. Transcripts were coded by thought unit and assigned to a total of 19 codes that represented thoughts, ideas, or feelings, experiences, or opinions that our participants had with regard to their spa visits. For example, our participants often spoke about friends, fun, relaxation, rewarding themselves, focusing on 'me,' and being pampered. These codes were not established a priori, but were identified by examining the data. Codes were labeled with both theoretical codes and *in vivo* codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, some thought units were coded with words put forth by the participants, ("relax" and "get away from it all") while others were coded with labels derived from the literature ("reward behavior" and "self-care".) This coding resulted in a 'tree' illustrating the relationships between coding categories.

Next, we engaged in the process of axial coding, organizing our free codes into categories of related ideas and looking for themes in the data (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this phase of the analysis, we used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), during which we compared data with each other, with data from other participants, and with extant theory. Several themes emerged with respect to how the women conceptualized the spa. The first theme that emerged was one of self-identity. The women spoke about how visiting a spa was good for their self-esteem, reminded them of their importance as a person, and enhanced feelings of self-worth. The second theme centered around the idea that someone was taking care of them at the spa, which was a departure from their usual roles of taking care of others. The final theme was one of relationship building – women were using the spa to build and maintain intimate relationships with friends and family.

We then engaged in theoretical sampling, examining extant theory and comparing it to our emerging concepts. We found that the themes that emerged during our analysis fit well into existing theories of women's leisure, and we used these themes to create a conceptual diagram (Charmaz, 2006). Our model and a detailed discussion of our results follow.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure that this study is believable, relevant, accurate, and truly represents the voice of women visiting the spa, multiple techniques were employed. Member checks were conducted with interviewees, allowing participants an opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews. Data was triangulated between subjects and with existing industry statistics, where available (Jick, 1979). Data was imported into and stored in NVIVO8 software to ensure that all information remained intact, organized, and accessible.

Results

During our data analysis, three broad themes clearly emerged. These themes addressed not just the reasons women visited the spa, but spoke to the larger purpose that the spa visits served. Previous literature in women's leisure has attempted to not merely describe the leisure pursuits of women, but to demonstrate how leisure forms an important component of women's experiences of the world and their place in it (Henderson, 1990a; Henderson, 1996). In particular, our study illuminated three key meanings of spa visits: Identity Formation, Resistance Against the 'Ethic of Caring,' and Friendship Building.

Spa Visits as Identity Building

Previous literature has demonstrated that women's leisure can serve as a way for women to challenge traditional gender roles and create a sense of self, and that exercising self-determination in leisure can assist women in finding autonomy (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992). Leisure and identity formation ideas (Shaw, 1999) suggest that because leisure provides people with a certain freedom of choice, people are free to select leisure activities that reaffirm their present identity, or to choose activities that are congruent with a desired identity. (Green, 1998) postulates that it is during leisure, in fact, that much gender identity work is conducted – where we establish and integrate our ideas of 'feminine' and 'masculine' (Green, 1998). In addition to helping women negotiate gender identity roles, leisure affords women an opportunity to develop a sense of self. (Son, Kerstetter, Yarnal, & Baker, 2007) note that leisure serves a critical role in identity formation by providing women with a time and place to develop confidence, self-esteem, and sense of self. The act of engaging in leisure demonstrates self-value – a sense of entitlement to individual time, space, and activity. (Son et al., 2007), in a study of older women, found that leisure opportunities served as catalysts for personal growth, confidence-building, the development of new interests, a reexamination of life priorities, and the reaffirmation of a shared identity with other women (Son et al., 2007). (O'Neill, 1993) examined women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and found that women gained empowerment, personal growth, self-esteem, and a sense of identity from their leisure time.

Our results mirrored these themes, thereby contributing to the field by identifying a new leisure context in which women build identity. The women in our study repeatedly touched upon the themes of self-importance and self-validation. Their visits to the spa served to reaffirm that they were worthwhile in their own right, and that they deserved leisure time and activity. Many of them, for example, used the spa as a reward to themselves.

"Sometimes, it's just to reward myself. Like I work, and I'm deserving, and it's one of those things you just have to treat yourself to every now and then." –DC

"Usually I only get to go to the spa when I am celebrating some kind of significant accomplishment, like passing an important test, or surviving a tough class." –KT

While they used the spa to reward themselves for working hard, several of the women seemed to see the spa as a 'treat' given to themselves simply because they felt that they deserved to be treated well. They used their time at the spa as a way of reaffirming their worth and value as a person.

"I just feel like I'm doing something positive for me." -DC

"Oh it makes me feel pampered. And it makes me feel that I am worth it. It's feeling important enough that this can be done for you and you are the center of it."-LA

(When I am at the spa).....*"I usually feel kind of pampered and honestly, a bit important somehow. Like I was the center of attention for awhile." -KT*

The women also saw a visit to the spa as a way to relax and recharge after challenges in their lives. They identified the spa experience as a way to focus and reflect on their lives and themselves.

"So for me I think it's just a way to force myself to focus on me. Like this is just for me. And kind of renew and give yourself a treat and you know I mean all the obvious things. It's a treat, you know it feels great and it is real, it does get stressed, getting rid of stress. So you know all that, but then I think deep down it's for making, you know it makes you give yourself time." -AO

"I usually go to a spa because it's time to feel good about myself or I have been through a bad time and this feels good and I can refocus and be sure that I like myself again." -LA

Taken together, our results indicated that for these women, their spa visits reminded them that they deserved a reward, helped them feel good about themselves, and reminded them that they were important, thus helping them build and reaffirm their identity.

Spa Visits as Resistance to the 'Ethic of Care'

One of the repeated themes that the women touched upon when discussing their identity experiences in the spa was the ability to use this time to focus on themselves and 'get away from it all.' This concept of escapism from responsibility is not specific to the spa, but is a characteristic of women's leisure in general. Indeed, (Hunter & Whitson, 1992) note that it is in the context of leisure that women are able to find relief from the responsibilities ascribed to them. The 'ethic of care,' is a term coined by (Gilligan, 1982) to describe the socialization of girls and women to cater to the needs of others at the expense of their own needs. These others may be partners, children, or aging parents. This ethic can lead to an orientation towards others and away from the self, wherein women define themselves in relation to the relationships they have with others in their lives. This overidentification with the needs of others can lead to a lowered level of self-fulfillment (Herridge, Shaw, & Mannell, 2003). A common problem for women who internalize this ethic in their family relationships is a lack of a sense of entitlement to leisure, believing that the needs of their partners and children supersedes their own needs (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991). Women may also feel guilty about engaging in autonomous leisure experiences (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991), feeling that they have abandoned their responsibilities to carve out time for themselves. These sentiments were echoed in our interviews.

"But what do I feel? Kind of naughty, maybe sometimes, like you know like I'm away, I'm not doing any work, so you feel kind of naughty, like you're playing hooky. It's kind of like you're sneaking out, like you're getting over." - AO

(When I started going to the spa)....."That was the beginning of the taking a break and rewarding myself. And my kids were old enough then that I could take the day off and not feel guilty."- DC

For women who have internalized the ethic of care, constantly engaging in tasks that serve the needs of others seems familiar. Visiting a spa, where another takes care of you, appears to be a rejection of this ethic, and can be interpreted as a resistance to defining oneself only in the role of care-giver, rather than receiver. These women consciously chose an activity where another was taking care of them.

"In a spa you're often taken alone to a room and your treated one on one. There's music, candles, warm baths, towels, robes, slippers, just the things that make you feel they have set this time aside for you and there is nothing else that is important in that hour." - LA

"Well it's weird, on one hand because you're not used to people giving to you, you know what I mean?"- AO

In addition to choosing a situation where another cared for them, our participants were very aware of the fact that for them, the spa served as an 'escape' or a 'getaway' from normal caretaking roles. The role that women hold in society as caretakers of others often results in few opportunities for leisure (Henderson, 1996). For mothers, in particular, the need to balance the care of others with care for themselves is extremely salient (Bialeschki & Michener, 1994). The multiple roles that women hold, and which are central to her identity, can conflict with her need for time to herself (Henderson, 1996). The women in our study articulated that their time in the spa fulfilled their need to stop doing for others, to relax, to escape, to find balance, and to just have fun.

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"Because even if your racing around, if I'm shopping I'm getting for them, like even if I'm shopping for me, you're grabbing for someone else and you're doing, do you know what I mean? Like you go out to lunch with your friends but you're always like I got to get back before, do you know what I mean? Your always kind of doing, but when you're in that space it's all about you. And you make yourself stop thinking about everything else to do."- AO

"When I go to the spa it's a whole day to myself."- DC

*"I get kind of stress free, relaxed, peaceful, because again it's just the environment itself and its void from anything else that I have to do in that day."
- DC*

"It's usually a time when I get to relax and "get away from it all". It means I can let go of the rest of the world and just "be" in the spa experience."- KT

"Now I kind of go for fun."- AO

In sum, these results indicate that women are using their time at the spa as a chance to take a break from their usual responsibilities of caring for others. The opportunity to focus on themselves and have someone else care for them allowed them to resist the idea that their purpose was solely to care for the needs of others.

Spa Visits as Relationship Building

Not only do women go to the spa to relax and have fun, but they go to have fun together (Green, 1998). Enjoying leisure time with friends emerged in our study as a central theme, and this echoes other literature in women's leisure. Women value time with their friends as a chance to maintain relationships and make connections with others who are important to them (Herridge et al., 2003). Previous research has firmly established that the social element of leisure is important to women (Kelly, 1989; Veal, 1993), that women seek this social element of leisure, and that this social component adds to enjoyment of leisure for women (Herridge et al., 2003). This emphasis on the social side of leisure appears to be constant throughout the lifespan and pervade across activities. (Malcolm & Mobily, 1990) found that young girls prefer social leisure activities, and (Son et al., 2007), in their study of older women in the Red Hat Society, demonstrated that the social dimension of participation in the Society emerged as a key motivator and lead to satisfaction with leisure among this population, as well. Building and maintaining friendships with other women has a number of positive outcomes for women. Women report enjoyment at the 'sense of sisterhood,' a feeling of being accepted and supported, and an increase in positive self-image as benefits of female friendships (Son et al., 2007). The results of our study indicated that these networks are important in the spa domain, as well, and that spa visits were a way to have fun, connect with those that are important to them, and 'feel like a girl.'

"I go with my friend and we get massages in the same room, hilarious" - AO

"Definitely I think when I think of spa I think of fun with your girlfriends. I would think that's my first thing and would I rather go with a friend? Absolutely. When my friend comes from Tennessee we always go, we do the full blow out and then we go out to coffee and it's just great. It's like a gift to me. I think of my friends, and I think of definitely girly fun, girl's night." -AO

"But the spa, it's nice sometimes, like I have a daughter if I go with her and it's like a mom and daughter type of day or also like some of the people at work, we go to the same place."- DC

Our interviews suggested that women enjoyed relaxing at the spa, but particularly valued the time spent with others, such as friends and family, allowing them build and strengthen these relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to contribute to the literature and theory on women's leisure by attempting to discover how women conceptualized their spa visits, what motivated them to go, and what meanings they ascribed to their spa visits. We used interviews as our method of data collection in order to give these women a voice of their own, and Grounded Theory to analyze our data in order to identify emerging themes. Our findings indicated that women visit the spa as a source of identity building. They experience their visits as a reaffirmation of their self-worth and an enhancement of their self-esteem. Previous work in other contexts (O'Neill, 1993; Son et al., 2007), has suggested that the satisfaction of identity needs is pervasive across women's leisure activities, and the present findings represent a significant contribution to the field, as we have now identified the spa as an additional context in which identity issues for women can be explored. Our results also demonstrated that women visit the spa as a form of resistance to the 'ethic of care' (Gilligan, 1982). While using leisure in this manner is not a new concept, (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991), our results in this area are particularly interesting and represent a unique contribution in that a spa, as opposed to most leisure contexts, provides the customer with the opportunity to be cared for by another, rather than being a caretaker. This intersection of resistance, caregiving, and caretaking suggests an interesting area for future research. Finally, our results indicated that the spa provided women with a context for building relationships. Previous research has established that the social element of leisure is important to women that women seek this social element of leisure (Henderson & Rannells, 1988). Our participants indicated that they not only went to the spa to relax and have fun, but more importantly, often went to the spa to relax and have fun with friends and family. In conclusion, the findings from our interviews support and extend previous literature about women's leisure and suggest new areas of study for the future.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study suggest that women find a number of reasons to visit the spa. They go for fun, relaxation, and socialization. While there is no previous literature demonstrating this, contemporary spa advertising highlights these aspects of the spa experience and attempts to capitalize on them. However, this study adds an additional layer to our understanding of women's conceptualization of the spa experience. Three salient themes emerged from our study. Women visit the spa as a form of identity building, to remind themselves that they are important and deserve to be treated well. Spa advertising highlighting this theme may be effective as a marketing tool. Women also visit the spa as resistance to the 'ethic of care.' They value being taken care of by others, for a change, and spa managers can use this information to insure that service levels provide the type of pampering, personalized service that these women are seeking. Women in our study also visit the spa as a form of relationship building with friends and family. An emphasis on group spa packages, 'girls night out' experiences, and interactive spa treatments can provide an opportunity for spa managers to fulfill this need.

Limitations and Future Research Considerations

As with all research, our study had limitations. We interviewed only 4 women, and all of them were Caucasian, well-educated, and from the upper-middle class. While we chose this sample for our study because it very closely mirrors the population of American spa customers, further research is needed to ascertain whether women of other cultures, ages, or education levels experience their spa visits differently. Our study also examined women who had experienced any type of spa visit – day spas, destination spas, resort spas, or salon/spas. As we continue to delve into the meaning of women's leisure time in the spa, we would be well served to differentiate among spa types and examine spa experiences in multiple spa settings. Finally, our study results represent the unique experiences of only a few women. Wider empirical testing of related and relevant questions in the future will allow us to generalize findings to a larger population.

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