



# Local community attitudes and perceptions towards thermalism

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## ABSTRACT

Thermalism is enjoying a global resurgence of interest as consumers seek out ethical, natural, and place-based wellness experiences. In Europe, the 'success rate of healing through thermalism has maintained the high reputation of thermal springs with curative powers'. However, thermalism has been culturally lost in the UK. This study focuses on a UK historical spa site currently undergoing restoration. Once restored, this will be one of three UK's only spa hotels with direct access to natural thermal mineral waters. An ethnographic case study design was used to explore community's perceptions and attitudes towards thermalism and the wellness tourism development model being implemented on location. Findings suggest that memories of the values and virtues of thermalism persist within the community and that, if harnessed, can play a significant role in supporting the local and national wellness agenda. However, findings also suggest that the reintroduction of thermal tourism in the location is perceived by the community as a luxury commodity reserved exclusively for the wealthy and elite members of society. Thermalism is a social and cultural resource and thus attention should be paid to ensure that any wellness tourism development model follows a cultural participatory logic and not solely an economic one.

## KEYWORDS

Community; thermalism;  
wellness tourism;  
development

## Introduction

Thermalism is defined as the use of "springs, rivers and sea waters at various temperatures for medicinal use" and is one of the most established and known spa practices in Europe (Capellini, 2010, p. 88; Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Gallois, 2007; Shealy & Church, 2008). According to Yeung and Johnston (2017), Europe is the second largest region in thermal/mineral springs revenues at an estimated \$19.7 billion. Recent literature identifies that thermalism has the potential to improve wellness and well-being of a wide variety of users including local communities (Costa, Quintela, & Mendes, 2015; Johnston, Smith, Puczkó & Ellis (2011); Nairandas & Bastos, 2011; Tourism Observatory for Health, Wellness and Spa [TOHWS], 2013). However, there are widespread disparities in terms of accessibility and cultural advocacy, wider acceptance and utilisation across Europe (see, for example, the discussions forwarded by Bushell & Sheldon, 2009; Diekmann & McCabe, 2012; Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Smith & Puczkó, 2010,

2017). This notion is of particular relevance to the UK as the popularity of thermalism has been declining since the early part of the twentieth century; and this was underpinned by the withdrawal of funding from the national health system and the progressive distancing of the medical profession from claims that mineral waters held proven advantage over normal water (Gallois, 2007; Rawlinson & Wiltshier, 2017; Rolls, 2012). As Adams (2015, p. 225), Capellini (2010) and Croutier (1992) point out “increased financial pressures, changing medical ideas, the promise of a new drug-based treatment system” ultimately influenced the way the UK spa industry adapted to find alternative ways of appealing to the consumer and the way consumers perceived and used UK spas.

In contrast, other European countries have conserved the notion of “taking-the-waters” as means of healing and fostering well-being and in doing so preserved much of their spa heritage (Adams, 2015). Evidence shows that across Europe, natural thermal spas are booming (Global Wellness Institute, 2014; Yeung & Johnston, 2017) and that thermalism continues to play a significant role in the application of medically endorsed health and well-being programmes and concepts that facilitate wellness. For example, in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, there are 52 mineral water health spas and more than 1900 mineral springs and each year the national health insurance program covers the cost of approximately 220,000 citizens spa treatment for 3 weeks (Lund, 2017). Furthermore, as Yeung and Johnston (2017) and Smith and Puczkó (2010; 2014) point out, an increasingly higher number of destinations are using thermalism as a strategy to attract wellness tourists (see, for example, the recent efforts of Hungary and Budapest in specific to reinvent itself as the city of medicinal waters and thermal spas or the efforts made by Croatia and Germany to have many of their spa towns listed by UNESCO as “Great Spas of Europe”). Building upon these considerations, this paper sets out to investigate the opportunities and the challenges inherent in the reintroduction of thermalism as both a wellness tourism product and historic practice within the UK. It does so focusing on a UK heritage spa town currently undertaking the restoration of its thermal bath facilities with a view of attracting tour. In order to unpack the arguments orderly, the paper first positions thermalism within the current wellness literature debates. It then presents the methodology underpinning the study and forwards a discussion on the benefits thermal tourism can bring to communities and guests alike. The latter section forwards the conclusions and implications for industry practice and further research.

## Literature review

### *Thermalism as a wellness practice*

Thermalism as a practice to facilitate wellness and well-being is not new (Becheri, 1989; Smith & Puczkó, 2017). Yet it could be argued that its renewed popularity rests on societal understanding of the need to focus on wellness and illness prevention (Nahrstedt, 2004; Smith & Puczkó, 2017; Yeung & Johnston, 2017). A report released by the think tank Price-WaterhouseCooper (2016) highlighted growing evidence that the current medical models of many national health systems around the world are not sustainable. Ageing population; evolving healthcare needs such as the increase in cases of obesity and diabetes, or antibiotic resistance and increase in medical costs were some of the many key factors identified as potential barriers to meet the planet future health needs (Beattie, 2011). Wellness,

with its mix of lifestyle changes and physical and emotional therapies, has been identified as a tool to reduce the society's cost of obesity, as well as a growing lack of physical fitness and increasing mental health issues (Intel, 2017). Within this context Medina-Muñoz and Medina-Muñoz (2013), Johnston, Smith, and Puczkó (2011), Beattie (2011), Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper (2009) and Cohen and Bodeker (2008) suggest spa baths are ideally placed to serve a wide range of ever-increasing consumer needs, offering meaningful wellness services that support and enhance conventional medical treatments. Research carried out by Steckenbauer, Tischler, Hartl, and Pichler (2017) and the TOHWS (2013) show that in Europe evidence-based therapies based on natural healing resources such as thermal waters are increasingly appealing to many domestic and international tourists. Yeung and Johnston (2017, p. 48) suggest how the vast thermal cultural heritage is increasingly used as a way of "attracting more leisure/wellness-oriented self-paying visitors" capable of diversifying destination offerings, extend the tourism season and promote regional development.

These discussions are particularly relevant to the UK, which has seen a raise in popularity in the use of natural thermal mineral spas driven largely by the development and restoration of the Thermae Baths Spa in 2006 and the opening of the luxury Gainsborough Bath Spa hotel in 2015 in the UNESCO World Heritage City of Bath. A move which was seen as spearheading future attempts to reignite a prosperous spa culture, not only in Bath, but also throughout the UK (Bath and North-East Somerset Council, 2017). Both facilities are currently the only UK spas with direct access to natural thermal spring waters (Laing, Voigt, & Frost, 2014). The Thermae Bath Spa is a public initiative day spa and, as Rolls (2012) outlines, offers hot baths, steam rooms, douches and complimentary therapies. The Gainsborough Bath Spa hotel is a private project and is currently the only hotel in the UK that offers a naturally heated mineral spa effectively utilising thermalism to facilitate and promote exercise, relaxation and integrated healthy lifestyle (Gainsborough Bath Spa, 2017). Another historical spa site currently undergoing restoration is the Buxton Crescent Hotel and Thermal Spa in the heritage Spa town of Buxton. Once restored, the five-star Buxton Crescent Hotel will be the second spa hotel in the UK operating spa facilities with direct access to natural thermal mineral waters. Yet the notion of reintroducing heritage-based thermalism as a tourism product development and destination portfolio diversification strategy (Steckenbauer et al., 2017) within the UK poses numerous challenges. At a practical level, the extension of this model across the country may not be easy as indeed much of the tangible heritage infrastructure at many heritage sites has been demolished alongside the demise of the UK thermal spa industry (Albu, Banks, & Nash, 2012). More importantly, it raises serious questions in terms of reintroducing the benefits and value of thermal spas and in so doing rebuilding a reputation for healing through thermalism not just to international audiences but particularly to domestic consumers.

Conceptually, the notion of wellness as "an approach to healthcare and lifestyle choice that is based on active prevention of illness and active promotion of a state of well-being" is becoming more and more apparent and rooted into the UK wider population with individuals taking ownership of personal well-being (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009, p. 5; Smith & Puczkó, 2010). However, it must not be assumed that the adoption of wellness practices is happening without resistance (NHS, 2013). Particularly in the context of spas, for example, Kahnem (2017, p. 4) highlights how in the mind of UK consumers treatments

“remain associated with special occasions and treats [... Furthermore] value also remains a barrier, with high agreement that treatments are only worth if they are on discount”; somehow supporting the idea that wellness through spa is about pampering and hedonistic luxury. If as Rolls (2012) suggests, modern consumers associate submersion in thermal spring waters accompanied with spa treatments with leisure and pleasure, what are the barriers and benefits to “reinstating thermalism” as a UK wellness practice? More specifically, can natural thermal spa destinations re-define themselves as serious contributors to healthcare services in the provision of an alternative for international and domestic consumers seeking wellness as enunciated by Cohen and Bodeker (2008) and Yeung and Johnston (2017)?

Wellness tourism (and more specifically thermal spa tourism) appears to have been identified by both industry and governments as a potentially effective practice “for empowering a wider range of individuals, communities and societies” (Bushell & Sheldon, 2009, p. 56) to embrace wellness. Conceptually, the successful restoration of the Thermae Bath Spa demonstrates how much of a national asset mineral springs are to the UK and how they can contribute to community regeneration through health and wellness tourism. Bath and North East Somerset Council (2016) states that the success of the Thermae Bath Spa was evident after just four years of operating, a statement supported by independent research carried out for operator Thermae, which also showed that 61% of visitors cited the thermal baths as their main reason for visiting the City of Bath. Additional spending in the city was attributed to the Thermae Bath Spa and estimated to be worth £9.94 million, this figure was part of an estimated total extra spending of £28.5 million generated by customers within four years of opening. However, the prospective success of Buxton community regeneration through health and wellness tourism cannot be directly compared to the City of Bath Spa. The City of Bath has an estimated population of 88,859 residents (BNESC, 2017). In comparison, Buxton is a relatively small town with a much smaller population of 24,000 residents (Derbyshire County Council, 2013).

Significant developments within small communities are felt most intensely at a local level (Tallon, 2013) and residents of Buxton will be directly affected by both the economic opportunity and the environmental and social changes the development will create. Changes may involve attracting an influx of wealthy tourists and potential new residents and businesses, prospects which may impact on demographics and lifestyle. For some residents, however, these changes may impact negatively on their current way of life and thus well-being and quality of life. In effect, potential structural inequalities could exclude some residents from the virtues the new development offers the community. Shi and Singh (2011, p. 697) point out that “exclusion is a sign of not simple difference but hierarchy and reflects deep inequities in the wealth, power, and prestige of different people and communities”. From a longer term perspective, divisions can be created between those who are integrated into the increased cash economy and economy market and those whose lives might be hindered by the development, gradually creating a divide within the community between the wealthy and the deprived and thus changing any positive attitude into resentment (Burns & Novelli, 2007).

Powis and O’Leary (2009) warn that wellness tourism development (or redevelopment) should be envisioned as a strategy and a process embedded within the communities it takes place and not simply as an economic activity separated from the social

processes of the destination. Wellness tourism (here thermalism), the authors say (p. 52), should: “offer the opportunity for improved health, which impacts both tourists and host communities, while providing economic advantage to the tourism industry and enhancing environmental sustainability”. This is echoed by Quintela, Costa & Correia (2017), Quintela, Correia, and Antunes (2010) and Bushell and Sheldon (2009) who also add how health and wellness tourism development requires a partnership between a wide variety of public and private stakeholders and communities in order to embed health and well-being benefits within a local context and not make them solely accessible to wealthy tourists. Haworth and Hart (2012) assert that efforts to prevent social exclusion and inequality need to involve empowering individuals and enhancing a sense of community.

It is argued that a fundamental requirement to prevent exclusion entails giving residents a voice and this can only be achieved by providing opportunities for all individuals within the community to take part in aspects of the development that affect their lives and enable people to unite together to achieve the needs and desired goals of the community. As Smith (2005 quoted in Haworth & Hart, 2007, pp. 74–75) observed: “well-being is fundamentally individual, but is also social. Direct participation in one’s immediate community and indirect participation in the larger society”. Appealing to a whole community of people to engage in the thermal spa and embracing wellness by investing in their health and well-being may not be as simple as offering discounted resident rates or affordable pricing – a strategy also applied by the Thermae Bath Spa (2016) and advertised as an incentive on the Crescent Hotel and Thermal Spa website (2017). In addition to conventional and complementary therapies and treatments, the context of mineral spring waters and their benefits may also need to be defined as a plausible and worthwhile offering of integrated spa services. Building upon all of the above, this study investigates the notion that the redevelopment of natural mineral spa facilities and practices through tourism can provide wellness and well-being benefits to both guests and host communities (Bushell & Sheldon, 2009; Quintela, Costa & Correia (2017); Peris-Ortiz & Álvarez-García, 2014; Powis & O’Leary, 2009; Quintela et al., 2010). Specifically, it does so focusing on exploring local attitudes and perceptions of thermalism as wellness tourism product and practice currently reintroduced within the heritage spa town of Buxton.

## Method and materials

An ethnographic case study design was deemed appropriate to address the aim and objectives of the study (Brown & Dobrin, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This approach was identified as necessary to explore residents’ attitudes and perceptions of the new Buxton Crescent and Thermal Spa development and explore the extent to which the new thermalism model can provide wellness and well-being benefits to both guests and host communities. Hacker (2013) states that doing research with communities is difficult and needs to be carefully designed in order to enable effective participation. Furthermore, gaining access can take time to establish relationships and develop the trust of potential participants. Semi-structured interviews with a wide range of local residents were conducted in order to reveal underlying attitudes regarding thermalism in general and the Buxton Crescent Hotel and Thermal Spa redevelopment project. In

total, 26 residents representing a wide range of stakeholders' views within the community participated in the study. The study looked to engage with a range of participants, including subjects who are perhaps unrepresented within the community, particularly those who are not active in any kind of community group. Adopting this technique ensured a diverse mixture of participants took part in the study. The literature review identified that residents of Buxton are diverse, with the majority of the working population forming a multi-dimensional professional workforce of skilled traders, managers, directors and senior officials, carers, leisure workers and those in the services industry (QPZM Local-Stats UK, 2016). The sample of participants reflected this with almost all either employed or retired, with only two identified as being within the periphery precariat segment and one precariat. Segments of which, authors such as Standing (2016) have identified as the precarious workforce. Access was obtained by living within the community over the course of a year. This enabled connections with residents to be built through integrating, participating and engaging in day-to-day community activities and experiences such as socialising, shopping, walking and voluntary work which enabled purposive sampling (Blankenship, 2010).

The rationale of this study relied on participants' own accounts of how they perceived the proposed thermalism model facilitates wellness and well-being at both individual and community levels. Therefore, building relationships with each participant was vital not only to elicit the depth and breadth of information but also to ensure that participants felt comfortable enough to openly discuss personal thoughts and feelings (Crang & Cook, 2007). To structure and organise the detailed participant accounts, the data gathered were analysed using a thematic method (Saldaña, 2015). The process focused on inductive analysis to allow for the data to be reconfigured, examined and critically evaluated. A coding system was developed, with the idea being to link units of data to form overarching categories or themes that lead to the development of theory. Care was taken to follow an iterative process, giving way to a creative and structured process by not only ensuring multiple interpretation checks but also allowing room for the development of ideas and ultimately help to justify the final theme outcomes (Bryman, 2016). Durand and Chantler (2014) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000) specifically outline the importance of comprehensiveness, thoroughness, transparency and reliability to aid with data management and to ensure credibility of data analysis. Therefore, consideration was given to each phrase, line and paragraph of the transcript to accurately depict what participants were describing (Bazeley, 2013; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). This content and thematic analysis was used to describe and interpret participant views, these views were mapped into categories such as attitudes, perceptions, feelings and knowledge, which were then organised into different sections to include both brief and longwinded accounts, detailed and even elaborated stories. Connections within the data were explored by comparing patterns in accounts, attitudes and experiences. For example, sections included categories such as positive versus negative attitudes, denials and acceptances. Specific attention was placed on the emergence of ideas with the aim of generating new theories that contribute to a detailed exploration into the use of thermal spas to facilitate wellness, local attitudes and breadth of knowledge towards thermalism. Any emerging themes were recombined, cross-compounded and analysed to refine themes and aid the development of the conceptual framework providing a basis for further analysis and the completion of the final results.

## Findings:

### *Heritage, memory and thermalism*

Irrespective of age or length of stay within the community, all participants clearly articulated a strong emotional attachment to the history and the tangible and intangible spa heritage of the town, and indeed, it is this enduring individual and social embodied awareness and feeling of collective loss which is sustaining a sense of vested commitment to the restoration of the Crescent building (formally known as St Anne's hotel) and its adjoining thermal baths:

I'm glad that it's taking place because it's a shame to see such a magnificent building being left to rot basically, so I'm glad that it's being rejuvenated. I think the rejuvenation of that hopefully will benefit everybody who lives in Buxton. It's nice to see the bits that they're building on to it like the swimming pool, and to see what they're doing with restoring just even the stonework outside, just to get it back to what it looked like [...] When you think of The Crescent in Bath and the one in Harrogate, you know, you don't want to see ours not being restored and being used by people. (Participant 13, Female, Age 40+, Employed)

The thermal baths, converted into the town's public swimming pool in the 1960s, were frequently used by the town residents until their closure in 1970s. As a result, many of the participants' accounts contained nostalgic stories of using the baths for socialising or, for example, learning to swim:

I remember my grandparents taking us down there years ago because there were thermal baths there so we used to go swimming in the thermal baths next door. We'd go there after school would walk down there, hand-in-hand after school to the thermal bath before the big pools were open. (Participant 7, Male, Age: 50+, Employed)

I remember as a child going down there and drinking water out of the well and then when I was a little bit older learning to swim in the thermal baths which were opposite, which are now part of the new Crescent development. There were three individual baths in there naturally heated that you could just swim in and it was great [...] that's where I learned to swim. (Participant 24, Male, Age: 60+, Retired)

The thermal baths, that's where you went swimming: in the three swimming pools, that's where I learned to swim in there. That's where the lessons went from school ... They were really nice pools, they were lovely ... they had thermal water in them and that was nice - it was nice to swim in. But we didn't appreciate it at the time that we were swimming in special water. You don't when you're a child, do you? (Participant 6, Female, Age: 60+, Employed)

I used to go and play with all my friends. Everybody did. Because it was a hotel wasn't it. It was quite a nice hotel. Yeah, I remember it. ... I was probably about four or five, so it was a long time ago. I was just having fun jumping in the pool. Didn't think anything about its benefits. Don't think I've ever done that anywhere else since, so [...] I suppose it would be lovely now to take children or grandchildren there wouldn't it. (Participant 20, Female, Age: 40+, Self-employed)

I remember, just about when the thermal baths were here and going in and having a different experience, there was different rooms, different baths, dark ones, warm ones, and we've lost all of that and we're hoping there'll be an element of getting back to that. I do remember going in with my mum and being a dark room and it was, it was very strange because it was like sensory deprivation almost, but as a kid you think "what's happening", you didn't

quite understand it. But there's a memory in there that you think "oh actually, that could be good to do something like that again". (Participant 25, Male, Age: 40+, Employed)

Importantly, many idiosyncratic and vivid accounts suggested that the memory of "actually bathing in thermal mineral waters" retained not only a record of the past but a testimony that positively advocates the benefits of thermal waters:

It's loaded with minerals and it seeps into your muscles, and that's why it does you, that's why it's invigorating, it does you good. To keep swimming in it – you see these pools when they're finished, they won't be swimming pools as such, they'll be bathing pools. You'll go down and just lie there and soak it up. I know by just jumping in that water, I know how good it is, I've been there [...] It's interesting that we people of Buxton know about the fantastic beneficial properties of Buxton water, we've always known about it for hundreds and hundreds of years, and whether or not we've kept it to ourselves, or it's just the way it is, because when people come [...] you're queueing up to fill your jug under the lion's mouth, they're like "ooh, it's steaming in winter", it's amazing, you've seen it in winter, it's incredible to see it steaming in winter, and they're thinking what on earth is this – they don't understand, they don't know. (Participant 18, Male, Age: 40+, Employed)

Those, they're sulphur pools. When you go in, you come out and your skin is like silk, it's an incredible feeling and sensation. You don't come out feeling your skin's like silk with these – but you come out feeling as though you're absolutely invigorated, it's as though you've been pummelled... That's what's so special about it – not just the drinking, it's the treatment [...] the benefits are external and internal, aren't they really. (Participant 19, Male, Age: 60+, Employed)

### *Thermalism as a tourist product and resource for community well-being*

Extant literature suggests that any form of wellness tourism development (or redevelopment) should aim to enhance the health and wellness of the resident population and promote a better quality of life from a local perspective and not solely focus on the wellness of the guests. To investigate these perspectives further, the research set out to explore the perceived potential impacts associated with the development at both individual and socio-economic levels. Almost all participants (18 out of 26) understood that the development was going to be a five-star hotel and thermal spa which aimed to bring more tourists to the town. Furthermore, despite concerns in relation to how the development might impact the town and their way of life, such as an increase in traffic congestion and availability of parking spaces, all of them were acutely aware of the positive benefits the development could bring, such as "the rejuvenation of the town", "increased trade" and an "increase in the number of jobs for residents":

I think it's a good idea to make into a hotel as it will raise a lot of money, jobs [...] I feel positive about it, because it's movement, because the Crescent building has just been standing there doing nothing for ages and whatever is done with it, that can't be as bad as what it is now can it? (Participant 2, Female, Age: 50+, Self-employed)

I'm hoping is that the town itself will look at improving because if we've got this great big development and we're expecting people to come and spend lots of money staying in this fancy-pants hotel, then we need more going in our town for those visitors, because really, it's naff, I'm very rarely going into town to shop or to buy clothes, or anything, so most of my shopping is done online because there's nothing in town. (Participant 4, Female, Age: 20+, Employed)

Really excited, because as a child The Crescent used to be St Ann's Hotel, and it was a place to visit, it was, everybody used to come and it's such a beautiful building. I'm hoping that the public, myself included can benefit from that as well. I think it's going to look stunning, I think it's going to be a massive landmark again, I really do, and I think people are going to ... I think it's going to bring more tourism in without a shadow of a doubt and I think that's going to be such a fantastic, exciting project really, and I can't wait to see it finished. (Participant 3, Female, Age: 50+, Employed)

Yet while positive about the development, almost all of the research interviewees described the development as being exclusively for "tourists" raising important questions as to the role the new thermalism model being reintroduced in the town would have for the community well-being. Indeed, while 22 out of 26 expressed a willingness to "go back" or "try the new thermal baths", many casted doubts on the new facilities being something that they might have the opportunity to participate in and utilise as it was before:

I mean that was social ... this is where you went for a swim and it was very, very pleasant because the water was warm to start with [...] that was a sort of social use of it and whether they'll revive something like that would appeal to local people I really don't know. (Participant 1, Female, Age: 60+, Retired)

If they could do that again and just open them like a public bath type thing, but obviously better - then that would work. But if they are going to treat it like a five-star hotel spa, which is what in my mind it is, then that's a different ball game [...] if it's marketed as five-star you are setting expectations of service, the temperature of the pool, everything that goes along with what it is expected from a five-star spa. (Participant 26, Female, Age: 30+, Employed)

I'm hoping it's not just hotel guests who can use it, that perhaps other people might be able to use it, so that's really exciting [...] I'm hoping it's restored sympathetically so that original features are still there - I'm hoping that's what will happen with it- and I hope that the Buxton people can use it. (Participant 6, Female, Age: 60+, Employed)

It's a good idea if local people can use it as well as hotel residents I think, that's a good idea. (Participant 2, Female, Age: 50+, Self-employed)

I think that it would be foolish for them not to do something like that for the local populous really - because I think people need to feel part of something, and I suspect that probably quite a large part of the population think that it's got nothing to do with them because it's going to be a luxury hotel. (Participant 5, Female, Age: 50+, Employed)

I think the whole town will benefit, I think it's going to bring new visitors to Buxton and take Buxton up a level, you know. But I think it should be hopefully to everyone's benefit, businesses and individuals alike, because it's just going to bring more people into the town, and Buxton has got a great mix anyway - I think it's just a situation where everyone should win, hopefully. (Participant 24, Male, Age: 60+, Retired)

I hope it does have a very positive impact on Buxton and tourism. But not just as in tourism people going to The Crescent, but literally drawing people in. You know, hopefully that will happen, if it was available to everybody it would be a massive thumb up from me because it would affect people's quality of life for the good, definitely. ... I passionately believe that it should be open to the people of Buxton. Definitely ... I think it would be absolute sacrilege if it wasn't. If the schools can't use it. (Participant 15, Male, Age: 40+, Employed)

Many participants mentioned "cost" or "expense" as a concern that may potentially prevent them from experiencing the new thermal spa facilities:

It's going to be very expensive price if it's going to be five-star. If it's going to be a five-star hotel no one around here can afford it can they? (Participant 7, Male, Age: 50+, Employed)

[...] I think the price will be prohibitive, it'll be something ridiculously expensive. (Participant 18, Male, Age: 60+, Employed)

Not everybody's going to be able to afford it, because it's not the right price bracket. ... the fact that they are already saying "we're going to be a five-star spa, we're going to be a five-star hotel". (Participant 26, Female, Age: 30+, Employed)

With some interviewees openly articulating fears that the new development would end up increasing disparity between the wealthy and deprived:

Whereas I spend every day seeing a very different side of Buxton ... obviously the people who go to the food banks and things aren't going to spend money on the spa, it's very much a town of two halves anyway. You do have quite a lot of poverty right next to quite a lot of wealth, actually. So, it is, in a way it would be shame to kind of increase that. Because inequality doesn't really help anybody in a way. I don't know, it depends what the plans are for it. If it's going to be an entirely kind of private five-star kind of thing with no kind of community use or whatever or whether it is something that is able to be used by a wider section of society. (Participant 21, Female, Age: 30+, Employed)

It's a beautiful place there to live. But there is a stark contrast, what people don't say - there's a very wide divide between rich and working class. (Participant 16, Female, Age: 40+, Employed)

How many people in Buxton will be able to use those facilities, and how many out of those people can't afford to use those facilities, ... I don't know how it's going to work, how much it's going to cost to use the facilities, you know, I would like to think it's available to everybody, but yeah to use it again, exclusivity that's when I look at it I think it's probably going to be out of reach of quite a lot of people. (Participant 15, Male, Age: 40+, Employed)

## Conclusions and implications

This study investigated the notion that the redevelopment of natural mineral spa facilities through tourism can provide wellness and well-being benefits to a wide variety of stakeholders including local communities, contributing to inspire, educate and empower people to change and take responsibility for their own health (Bushell & Sheldon, 2009; Quintela, Costa & Correia (2017); Peris-Ortiz & Álvarez-García, 2014; Powis & O'Leary, 2009; Quintela et al., 2010). It did so exploring local community's views towards the restoration of a UK historical spa site, namely the Buxton Crescent Hotel and Thermal Spa in Buxton. Findings from the study show that the model currently in use does not appear to have initiated any particular changes in behaviour in relation to the community's acceptance and understanding of this practice as a way of improving wellness. While residents' attitudes are positive, thermalism is being primarily understood in terms of the process of development and that residents are to an extent disassociating themselves from the model that is being created within their town. Findings show that the existing five-star luxury product development model used to reintroduce thermalism is perceived as elitarian and focusing primarily on attracting wealthy outsiders. Participant accounts reveal concerns relating to the associated impact on their own quality of life and benefits to be gained from the development. Importantly, they point at how the exclusive nature of the project may ultimately contribute to sustain a notion of perceived disparities in

terms of access and use between tourists and residents. Some participants were concerned whether they would feel welcome or fit in using the spa alongside rich visitors with perceived possible differences in lifestyle, income or outlook.

Powis and O'Leary (2009) among many others highlight how wellness tourism development should be thought of as a strategy and a process embedded within the community and not simply as an economic activity separated from the social processes of the destination. However, findings show that in the context of Buxton, the reintroduction of thermalism appears to follow the logic of commerce and economics and arguably not that of a cultural participatory logic. Findings from this study suggest that there are weaknesses in the process of consultation and establishing community participation, suggesting that more attention needs to be paid towards identifying how the community can benefit from thermalism as a wellness resource (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009).

At a time when the national health systems across Europe and the UK are under increasing strains and health standards are beginning to show evidence of decline, there has never been a greater need for support on how to live well and enjoy optimum health. Thermal spas in this context are uniquely placed to fulfil this need with more and more international and domestic tourists accessing this wellness practice across Europe (Cohen & Bodeker, 2008; Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; GWI, 2014; Yeung & Johnston, 2017).

There are strong arguments that suggest the links between community and thermalism have been largely severed in the UK (Albu et al., 2012). However, findings from this study show that memories of the old Buxton Thermal Baths still linger among the community, especially in the older residents who remember them fondly. Significantly these memories trigger recognition and positivity towards the therapeutic benefits of mineral thermal waters. It is indeed the power of these memories and the attachment and commitment the participants demonstrated in owning the heritage aspects of their town that reveals how the ties between community and thermalism have not been completely severed. Importantly, it is the power of these memories that could make residents receptive and malleable to the notion of embracing thermalism as part of a holistic approach to health and well-being. Findings from this study show that the new thermal tourism model being developed has the potential to make a significant difference to the wellness of residents of a small heritage spa town. However, care should be taken to recognise that thermalism has traditionally been a geological wellness resource and a framework for community health and wellness and not a commodity that caters solely for the externals or reserved for the affluent members of society (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). As GW (2017) points out that there is a growth in people's perceptions that there is an "inequality of wellness and wellbeing". Creating a thermal tourism model which primarily aims to attract wealthy outsiders may end up reinforcing the perception that "wellness" is ultimately only for affluent consumers.

This research has implications for both academia and industry. This study contributes to a growing body of research that aims to understand the role thermalism can play in improving wellness and well-being, and how it can be developed as a beneficial model for a wider variety of stakeholders (Diekmann & McCabe, 2017; Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Global Spa Summit, 2011; Smith & Puczko, 2017). Specifically, it contributes by exploring these issues in the context of the UK, a country that has only recently begun to redevelop its thermal offer. The Buxton Crescent Hotel and Spa is indeed one of only

three examples of thermalism facilities within the UK, all of which are at different stages of product development. While limited to Buxton, findings from this research have practical implications, suggesting how the product could be further developed to enhance its popularity among local consumers and contribute to a better understanding of thermalism as a practice in general. It is acknowledged that these findings cannot be directly compared to (for example) the City of Bath Spa, nor can they be generalised across the UK. Thus it is envisaged that more research should be carried out to investigate and understand thermalism as a practice for wellness and well-being and how it can be developed to address the wider national wellness agenda.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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