

## (RE)THINKING THERMALISM IN EUROPE FROM THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE: A THEORETICAL REFLECTION

Vera ANTUNES\* 

Universidade da Beira Interior, Departamento de Comunicação, Filosofia e Política,  
Faculdade de Artes e Letras, LabCom, Covilhã, Portugal, e-mail: vantunes@ubi.pt

Gisela GONÇALVES 

Universidade da Beira Interior, Departamento de Comunicação, Filosofia e Política,  
Faculdade de Artes e Letras, LabCom, Covilhã, Portugal, e-mail: gisela@ubi.pt

Cristina ESTEVÃO 

Universidade da Beira Interior, Departamento de Gestão e Economia, Faculdade  
de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, NECE, Covilhã, Portugal, e-mail: cristina.estevao@ubi.pt

---

**Citation:** Antunes, V., Gonçalves, G., & Estevão, C. (2022). (RE)THINKING THERMALISM IN EUROPE FROM THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE: A THEORETICAL REFLECTION. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 44(4), 1200–1208. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.44403-935>

---

**Abstract:** This research aims to present a conceptual approach to the strategic importance of communication in the thermal sector. This therefore seeks to identify and analyse the scientific publications addressing the thermal sector from the strategic communication perspective. Furthermore, this also sets out the objectives and conclusions of the studies and conveys their relationship with communication. This study correspondingly applies a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) in keeping with the PRISMA Statement method covering the Scopus and Web of Science databases with 27 articles incorporated into the qualitative analysis. The results demonstrate that the three clusters obtained via the similarity of words enable the identification of the features that frame strategic communication as an essential tool for leveraging and promoting thermalism. This study contributes to identifying strategies and operationalised guidelines impacting on the publications able to outline promising future research paths for better knowledge about thermal tourism in Europe.

**Key words:** Europe, tourism, thermalism, public relations, strategic communication

\* \* \* \* \*

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an industry not only with high growth potential but also generating the competitive value that boosts the economic performance of countries (Sipayung et al., 2021). The term wellness is often raised in European tourism (Tang et al., 2021) and represents a very modern form of relaxation and regeneration, with personal care deemed essential for physical and mental well-being, the reasons driving the exponential growth in demand for this type of tourism around the world (Liberato et al., 2021). From this perspective, the concept of wellness that initially derived from the application of mineral and natural heat (balneotherapy and thermalism) offers a good starting point for a discussion on the growth and development of the thermal and health and wellness tourism sectors (Erfurt and Cooper, 2009). Thermalism has been gaining importance in recent years, both in the global context of tourism and in academic research, visible in the various approaches and scientific areas, specifically marketing, health, and psychology (Pelegrin-Borondo et al., 2020; Wang, 2015). Trends and evolution in the media, as well as its overall influence, have also contributed to this type of tourism developing very rapidly (Sipayung et al., 2021). This research strives to identify and define an appropriate communication strategy for promoting thermal destinations. In this context, this article's objective is, through a systematic literature review (SLR), to analyse and identify the scientific articles addressing thermalism from the strategic communication perspective in order to reflect on the current state of research on this sector. Furthermore, this shall also identify the objectives and conclusions of the studies and understand their relationship with communication. To this end, two research questions guided our study: Q1 - *What are the subjacent dimensions of thermalism emphasized in scientific publications?* Q2 - *What is the relationship between strategic communication and thermal tourism?* Strategic communication should provide a lever capable of achieving the potential of this tourism product and foster the economic growth of the destinations.

The proposed conceptual model includes scenarios and communication strategies to overcome the communication gap in thermalism. After this brief introduction, the structure of this article contains four sections: in the first, a theoretical approach details thermalism and strategic communication; in the second section, there comes a description of the methodology applied before the third presents the findings and analysis of the articles as well as the discussions and final considerations of the articles under review. Finally, we set out the conclusions, limitations, and future lines of research.

---

\* Corresponding author

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into health, wellness and medical tourism has grown significantly (Smith, 2015). According to Alina-Cerasela (2015) and Mijajlovic et al. (2020), thermalism represents one of the oldest types of tourism and has also undergone constant evolution. Tang et al. (2021) identify how thermalism dates back to Roman times, when they took public baths in European cities with natural thermal waters, such as in France and Britain. The European culture of thermal tourism then developed in Bath in Britain, Slovakia in Eastern Europe and Baden-Baden in Germany. Gradually, other thermal destinations have since promoted thermalism, such as in the United States, Canada and more recently in Asian countries, including Japan and Korea. However, this raises a problem as there is no single definition of what constitutes thermalism. Mijajlovic et al. (2020) state that for many Western European countries, thermalism emerges as an important factor in local and regional development and defining thermalism constitutes a priority as the term is often used in tourism promotion under the "SPA" designation.

According to Smith and Puczko (2015), this may therefore lead to confusion in the minds of some consumers who primarily seem to associate the word 'spa' with relaxation and comfort. In this perspective, Mosqueira et al. (2009) suggests three classifications for centres according to the type of water: (1) spas and spa centres, which apply mineral waters to preventive and therapeutic purposes; (2) thalassotherapy centres, which use sea water and marine elements for preventive and therapeutic purposes; and (3) spas that offer hydrothermal and beauty techniques through tap water, with or without additives. Mijajlovic et al. (2020) maintains thermalism is an authentic term because it implies being performed in a thermal centre to improve physical and mental health, treat certain diseases or just relax the body through using natural mineral water.

The tourism industry has traditionally been based on economic and financial returns with metrics serving for the measuring of tourism performance standards (Costa et al., 2022), however, communication remains a necessary area of research and deemed by Emanoil and Fraticiu (2013) as vital to organisational success. According to Song et al. (2021), a destination might class as excellent but when there are shortcomings in its communication, whether through a lack of social media or a lack of promotional channels facilitated by technology, its level of attractiveness will be influenced.

After undertaking close scrutiny of the strategy concept, Hallahan et al. (2007) present an in-depth analysis of the term that opens new horizons for the practice of communication in modern organisations. In this sense, the exploration of the different meanings related to the term strategic as applied to the practice of communication management enables new research trends in the field of communication, contemplating all organisational aspects and skills, thus legitimising communication work across all levels. On the one hand, Pan et al. (2019) refers to how the communication strategies deployed should be realistic and direct as these types of tourism destinations provide tourists with a healthy lifestyle, maintaining and promoting their physical, mental, and spiritual health through travel. On the other hand, Kim et al. (2017) indicate it is essential to design marketing strategies able to promote health and wellness tourism and that communication professionals might incentivize previous tourists to share their travel stories on social media, through videos, photos, comments highlighting their memorable experiences. This approach also leads us onto clarifying the term strategic which, according to Hallahan et al. (2007), integrates the study of several areas of communication including marketing, public relations, and advertising.

Achieving a positive impact for a company/tourism destination necessarily requires a positively perceived brand and reputation conveyed through an open communication strategy (Smith, 2015). The promotion of tourism destinations has to respond to the expectations and desires of potential visitors and to offer specialised, distinguished, and authentic products and services built on the potential endogenous resources of a destination that, coupled with history and traditional competences in health and wellness, are important factors for these destinations maintaining their competitive advantage (Szromek and Naramski, 2019). Heung and Kucukusta (2013) identify the most effective methods for promoting health and wellness tourism, such as advertising in social media, government support and organising new regional events. Anaya-Aguilar et al. (2021) and Joukes and Gerry (2010) mention websites with well-structured, updated information that should be bidirectional in real time. Meanwhile, Liu et al. (2021) identify how travel websites allow tourists to share their thoughts, beliefs and experiences in relation to various travel destinations. Website evaluation models have to become diverse and accurate and websites have to become high-level communication systems. Thermalism for a better projection must, through using strategic communication, follow trends and adapt continuously to the new demands of the clients of the future. The relevance of this article stems from it addressing strategic communication from the thermalism perspective.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method adopted here is an SLR using the PRISMA Statement because it is an iterative process and researchers may need to specify or modify their original review protocol over the course of the review (Moher et al., 2009).

The SLR process carried out in February 2021 involved four distinct steps. First, the keywords "public relations" OR "strategic communication" AND "wellness tourism" OR "health tourism" OR "thermal tourism" were firstly identified and then applied in a search of the Scopus and Web of Science databases. This option stems from these databases covering several different fields, specifically Sciences and Technology, Social Sciences and, Arts and Humanities, among others. In addition, they together broaden the search and reduce the likelihood of bias in journals indexed exclusively to one of the databases, with Mongeon and Paul-Hus (2016) ascertaining how this returns the breadth necessary for truly comprehensive research.

This step resulted in the detection of 4,525 scientific article. In the second stage, following careful screening, we removed 55 duplicate articles and, based on the exclusion and eligibility criteria defined for fine-tuning the study review, we then excluded 2,487 articles as they were Systematic Review Studies, Conference Proceedings, Books, Book Series, Chapters in Book, Serials, lacking in their Full Text, not in English and with 1,956 full-text articles excluded on the grounds they lacked any relationship with the study's focus, or were not Empirical Studies. The third stage subjected the articles to analysis initially by considering the abstract before then proceeding with an in-depth reading of the full articles to identify the themes and sub-

themes established. This final review stage resulted in 27 articles that served for the qualitative analysis process. We deployed EndNote20 and Nvivo software to identify the articles for the study, analyse them and systematize the information collected in accordance with the research objective. Figure 1 illustrates the flow diagram according to the PRISMA Statement.

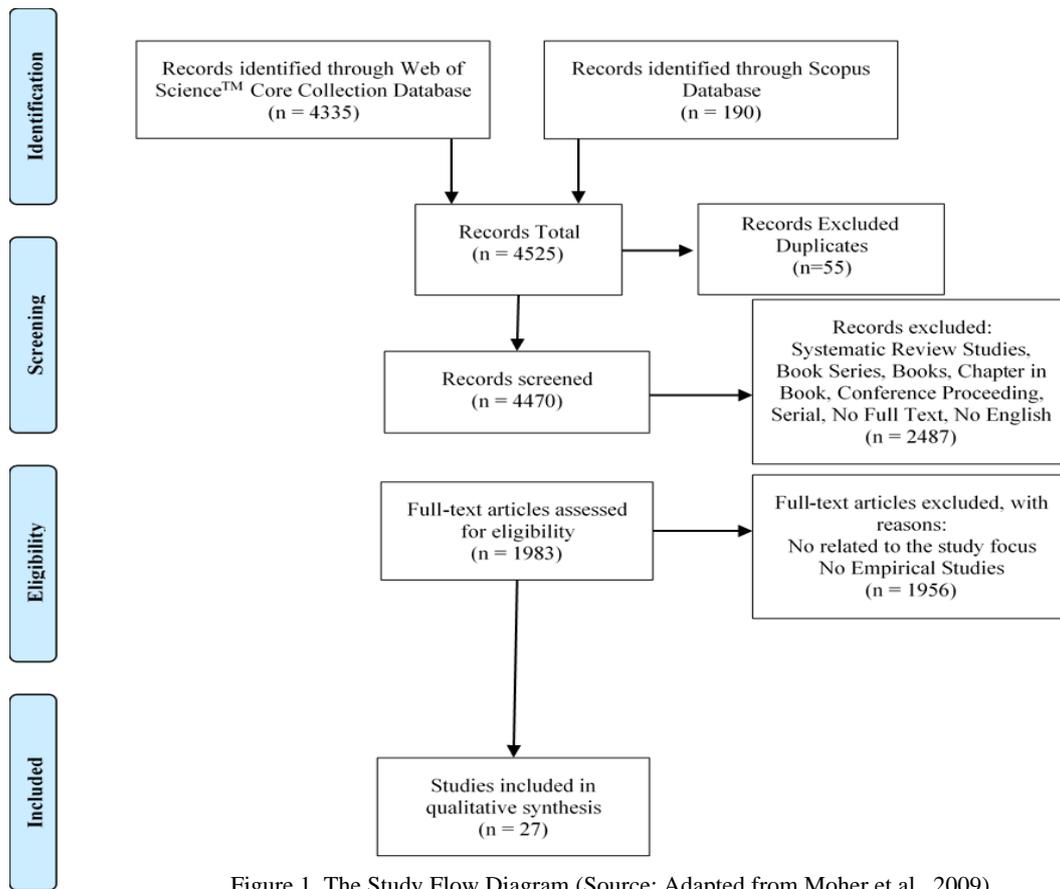


Figure 1. The Study Flow Diagram (Source: Adapted from Moher et al., 2009)

**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This section describes the study results and analysis. Firstly, Figure 2 depicts the year of publication of the articles: Analysis of the graph above conveys how in 2013 and 2015, there were already expressions of interest in thermalism by various researchers with the publication of six articles in total. However, 2019 and 2020 experienced the largest number of publications, with the 12 articles reflecting the heightened scientific importance of this theme.

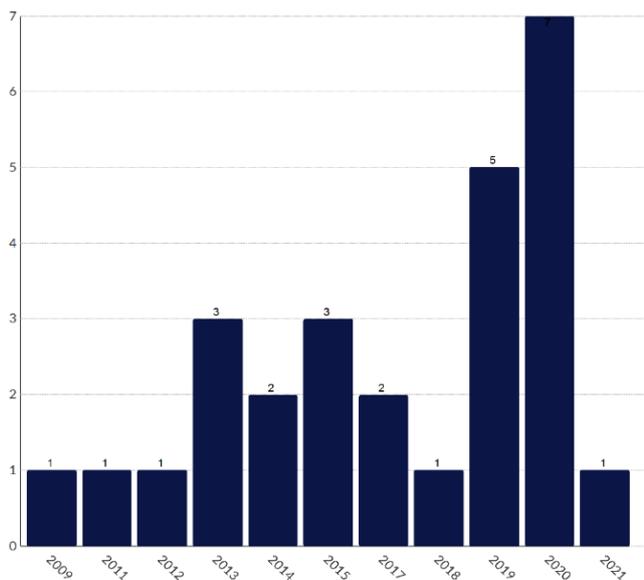


Figure 2. Number of References by Year of Publication

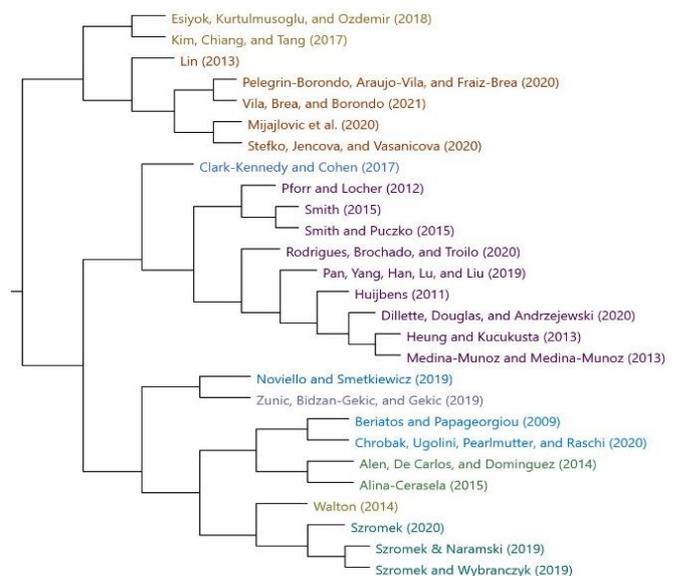


Figure 3. Cluster by word similarity

Considering that 2019 marked the appearance of Covid19, it is notable that this year saw an increase in publications related to well-being across different fields of science. Navarrete and Shaw (2021) stress the need to make known the

opportunities provided by the thermal sector, focusing on treatment, prevention and well-being, conveying the benefits of this type of tourism through attractive messages. Table 1 systematises the methodologies used in the selected study sample according to the instrument, type of study, and analysis carried out: We may therefore conclude that most studies adopt quantitative approaches and as regards the study type, the questionnaire accounted for the most commonly used instrument. However, the importance of qualitative methodologies that consider different points of view and research practices is growing and strives to understand the particularity of concrete cases. Qualitative research involves the collection of a selection of empirical materials, important for the communication research area, with examples being websites, platforms, and netnography to analyse social media content and sentiments (Liu et al., 2021).

Table 1. Type of Study of the Articles Analysed

Type of study	Instrument	References
Quantitative	Questionnaire (14)	Beriatos and Papageorgiou (2009); Chrobak et al. (2020); Clark-Kennedy and Cohen (2017); Esiyok et al. (2018); Heung and Kucukusta (2013); Kim et al. (2017); Lin (2013); Medina-Munoz and Medina-Munoz (2013); Mijajlovic et al. (2020); Pelegrin-Borondo et al. (2020); Smith and Puczko (2015); Stefko et al. (2020); Szromek and Wybranczyk (2019); Vila et al. (2021)
	Delphi Study (2)	Pan et al. (2019); Smith (2015)
	Secondary Data(1)	Alen et al. (2014)
Qualitative	Case Study (3)	Rodrigues et al. (2020); Walton (2014); Zunic et al. (2019)
	Interview (3)	Alina-Cerasela (2015); Huijbens (2011); Pforr and Locher (2012)
	Netnography (1)	Dillette et al. (2020)
Mix	Questionnaire and Interview (3)	Noviello and Smetkiewicz (2019); Szromek (2020); Szromek & Naramski (2019)

Figure 3 reports the results of the cluster analysis that grouped the articles in terms of the similarity of their vocabulary based on Pearson's Correlation Coefficient. This analysis stands out due to the importance of thematic segmentation as a determining factor for better knowledge on this field. Cluster 1 - Tourist Behaviour, Emotional Balance, Economic and Financial Analysis and Marketing (Esiyok et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Lin, 2013; Mijajlovic et al., 2020; Pelegrin-Borondo et al., 2020; Stefko et al., 2020; Vila et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2017) analyse the relationship between engagement, motivation, and loyalty in the context of the wellbeing tourism destination as a strategy to understand and predict the behaviour of this type of tourist. Spirituality, health, pleasure with experience, nature, relaxation, unique environments, culture, and traditions are some of the motivations identified in the study. If, on the one hand, Vila et al. (2021) propose a "model based on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT2)", originally applied to a non-technological service, to describe potential tourist purchase intentions in a spa context. The key implication of this study's results for spa managers involves the need to focus their communication on convincing potential customers of the utility of their services. In this regard, both health and leisure aspects must be considered when formulating spa marketing communication campaigns and designing thermal suites. On the other hand, Pelegrin-Borondo et al. (2020) deploy the "Cognitive-Affective-Normative (CAN) model" to compare the factors that explain the purchase intentions in relation to two types of spa tourists: health and wellness tourists.

They also mention the importance of promotional communication within a differentiated and segmented strategy. Esiyok et al. (2018) analyse the factors affecting the duration of stay of senior spa guests, which results in fluctuating lengths of stay and hence the corresponding importance of defining marketing strategies specifically tailored to this market segment.

Lin (2013), in his structural model, integrates the factors of "destination personality" and "gastronomic experience and psychological well-being" and supports the emerging belief that intentions to revisit a spa destination are strongly influenced by these respective factors. The study's findings also aim to help spa destination organisations improve the definition of their marketing strategies so as to build tourist loyalty and ensure stability through a sustainable economic development model. The study by Stefko et al. (2020) highlights the importance of evaluating the economics of companies and promoting the development of effective management strategies for economic and sustainable growth to boost the sector's profitability. Finally, Mijajlovic et al. (2020) provide an overview and complete assessment of the recent state of wellness places according to specialist decision making and multi-criteria analytical methods, putting forward 16 choices and eight sustainable criteria for improving spas and consequently raising their competitiveness. They consider the results obtained can contribute to managers understanding the positioning of their establishments and better leverage their advantages while mitigating their shortcomings to improve their business through recognising marketing and communication as essential promotional tools. From this perspective, forecasting tourism demand and promoting effective management strategies for the economic growth of the sector should be supported by effective marketing strategies.

Cluster 2 - Innovation, Destination Image, Diversity, Benefits and Promotion/ Communication (Clark-Kennedy and Cohen, 2017; Dillette et al., 2020; Heung and Kucukusta, 2013; Huijbens, 2011; Medina-Munoz and Medina-Munoz, 2013; Pan et al., 2019; Pforr and Locher, 2012; Rodrigues et al., 2020; Smith, 2015; Smith and Puczko, 2015).

Innovation, through the emergence of new products and services, characterizes this cluster. Within this perspective, Pan et al. (2019) propose a new concept for wellness tourism that includes health preservation, sports, recovery, medical treatments alongside some concepts integrated into Chinese culture. Medina-Munoz and Medina-Munoz (2013) refer to how developing this type of tourism requires certain specific considerations, especially: the transformation of goods and services into health care convenience, natural landscapes, the relationship between daily life and holidays, as well as the reasons for seeking this type of tourism. Dillette et al. (2020) advocate creating a holistic sense of wellness for tourists, presenting strategies to underpin its development: firstly, the "body dimension", secondly, the "mental aspect of wellness travel", thirdly, an emphasis on "solo travellers" (the power of sharing experiences with others while travelling

alone) and finally, a focus on creating and maintaining an “environment conducive to wellness”. Within this perspective, they provide new perceptions for wellbeing tourism businesses that integrate the ideas of building interpersonal relationships, personal growth, dining experiences, development, and community atmospheres.

Huijbens (2011), meanwhile, highlights how wellness destination images are typically nature-oriented, such as healthy local cuisine, local culture, outdoor experiences, clean air, nature and water. Similar to other existing health and wellness clusters, Smith (2015) proposes the creation of a Baltic Health Tourism Cluster with the aim of increasing cooperation in the region and improving service excellence through collaborative work to successfully promote its wellness range. This strategy seeks to create strong brands with criteria of excellence, highlighting the importance of communication in consolidating this brand and the image of the tourist destination. Heung and Kucukusta (2013) study the resources and main promotional strategies for the development of wellness tourism destinations. They highlight environmental resources, landscapes, clean air, clean water, among other attributes, as necessary for the promotion of this niche market. They also analyse the most effective methods for promoting this type of tourism, such as advertising on social networks, among others.

While, Smith and Puczko (2015) analyse the current profile of health and well-being tourists, those who believe that well-being is an important part of their lifestyle, implementing the new concept of lifelong well-being. Rodrigues et al. (2020) refer to how designing strategies for the promotion of this type of tourist destination should take into account the satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors identified using sentiment analysis. Clark-Kennedy and Cohen (2017) present indulgence, relaxation, escape, connection with nature and taking time out as key motivators for hot springs bathers, and the vast majority of hot spring users perceive health benefits from bathing. The most significant benefits from hot spring bathing are reported for back pain, arthritis, stress/anxiety, depression and insomnia and balneotherapy warrants consideration from Australian health practitioners and insurers as a form of complementary therapy for these conditions. As regards benefits, Pforr and Locher (2012) study the impacts of reforms in Germany applied to the health and wellness tourism sector. They also address the challenges and opportunities that have arisen from this transition process, centring on health but in a holistic approach. The integration of a wide range of products and services under the umbrella of medical and wellness tourism are the new offerings that provide a mix of health, wellness, and pleasure. Of the various relevant factors, quality stands out both for its importance to loyalty and for application in marketing strategies. Existing infrastructure, history, long-standing reputation, therapies and medical expertise provide officially recognised health resorts in Germany with competitive advantages and a quality label that positions them at the top of the wellness tourism sector.

Based on the attributes of a destination, innovation, quality, reputation and brand are essential factors for communication as a promotion strategy, once again highlighted in these studies.

Cluster 3 - Business and Tourism Development Models, Sustainability and Promotion Strategies (Alen et al., 2014; Alina-Cerasela, 2015; Beriatos and Papageorgiou, 2009; Chrobak et al., 2020; Noviello and Smetkiewicz, 2019; Szromek, 2020; Szromek and Naramski, 2019; Szromek and Wybranczyk, 2019; Walton, 2014; Zunic et al., 2019)

While Szromek and Naramski (2019) examine business management models for tourism treatment activities carried out in spas, emphasizing its uniqueness, for example, in terms of the raw materials available to the establishment (thermal waters). Alen et al. (2014) propose an efficient business model with differentiated services as a strategy for survival. We consider that promotion strategies based on differentiation and on appropriate communication and distribution channels are fundamental to properly positioning thermal establishments. Sustainability is now a prevalent concept and thermalism represents no exception. Szromek (2020) and Szromek and Wybranczyk (2019) propose a business model with sustainable policies and natural environments for mutual benefits. They mention, on the one hand, that the relationships developing in the health and wellness sector are promising coupled with the importance of applying a relational model based on mutual trust, extending also to companies and other entities within this sector, including the government through local government measures. The entrepreneurs participating in this study recognise how sustainable mutual synergies may be the only chance of surviving the crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. On the other hand, the design and deployment of sustainable business models focused on tourist/therapist perspectives gain support from a set of characteristics able to become the basis for building a thermal business model capable of adapting customer value suggestions to the needs demonstrated by their eventual tourists.

Noviello and Smetkiewicz (2019) propose potential utilisation of geothermal resources for boosting the socio-economic development of the district of Bagnoli following the example of thermal complexes in Poland and Austria. Bagnoli is an area with currently unexploited natural potential that could boost the sustainable development of cities and regions leading to positive socio-economic changes of localities and regions as well as to environmental improvements. Chrobak et al. (2020) suggest a comprehensive model of thermalism, integrating knowledge of the landscape and the scientific value of nearby geological features. The authors sought to understand the receptivity of tourists with the perspective of increasing their knowledge about a specific natural area, reinforcing the utility and relevance of promotional campaigns for deepening people's general geological knowledge about the territory. This is an untapped potential that can help personalise present and future tourists by exploiting invisible knowledge, such as natural mineral water and underground minerals. Beriatos and Papageorgiou (2009) state that the development of thermal tourism in Greece should be based on a model with reliable and sustainable service provision capable of contributing to the desirable attractiveness of any thermal destination.

Walton (2014) explain the intergenerational success through the case study of Balneario Mondariz (a family-run spa hotel with an elite clientele) and identify factors such as amenity, patronage, imaginative advertising, networking, sustainability, alongside additional factors of Galician culture important for integration into the regional economy.

Zunic et al. (2019) developed a balneological study in the Ilidza region, due to the rich existing heritage of thermal waters, thermo-minerals and minerals, with high thermalism value and impacts on destination development. The importance of communication in the promotion and projection of a new tourist destination is essential for the marketing of

Sarajevo as a European health tourism destination. Finally, Alina-Cerasela (2015) highlighted modern health tourism through comparative analysis of two hotel units specialising in thermal treatments, one in Romania and the other in Spain. Thermalism is a key segment for both countries and two aspects stand out: the social factor, which is developed in both countries through programs for the elderly population, the main consumers of these services. From the communications perspective, the authorities get involved in promoting wellness tourism through a series of social programs.

In order to attract tourists and increase their awareness in this field, these studies recommend the deployment of targeted and creative communication strategies with a particular focus on sustainability.

## DISCUSSION

Through this analysis, we sought to trace the research trends in the theme under study and identify the main challenges characterizing the contemporary relationship between thermalism and communication. The first debate surrounds to the importance of thermalism in recent years, both in the global context of tourism and in academic research, visible in various approaches and scientific areas such as marketing, health and psychology (Wang, 2015). However, this reflection presents an urgent need for the continuous updating of research on emerging themes in the field of communication related to thermal tourism, through the publication of scientific articles on thermal destinations in journals with a high impact factor to meet the goal of promoting thermal tourism. The second, relates to the problems inherent to the vagueness of the term "thermalism" (Smith and Puczko, 2015). Thermalism involves hot springs where the waters hold medical or healing functions. According to Mijajlovic et al. (2020), thermalism however represents an authentic term and cannot be confused with other types of wellness tourism. From the perspective of Brandão et al. (2021), thermal tourism is one of the oldest types of tourism worldwide and has undergone significant changes over time. While thermal springs and spas were initially mostly associated with places of healing, the perspective of thermal tourism today differs. Its scope of action now extends to environmental issues, aesthetics, quality of life and prevention. Nevertheless, we share the opinion that its singularity, a source of natural mineral water, with important therapeutic properties for the treatment of certain illnesses, constitutes the timeless characteristic that differentiates thermal tourism from other types of wellness tourism. The term "thermal tourism" or "thermalism" are synonyms, whereas the term "SPA" may mislead researchers as this may include treatments with any type of water, with or without additives (Gómez Pérez et al., 2019; Mosqueira et al., 2009). Finally, we have drafted a conceptual model, presented in figure 4, in order to highlight the logical aspects reflected in the articles in conjunction with the factors framing strategic communication as an essential tool for leveraging and promoting thermalism in Europe.

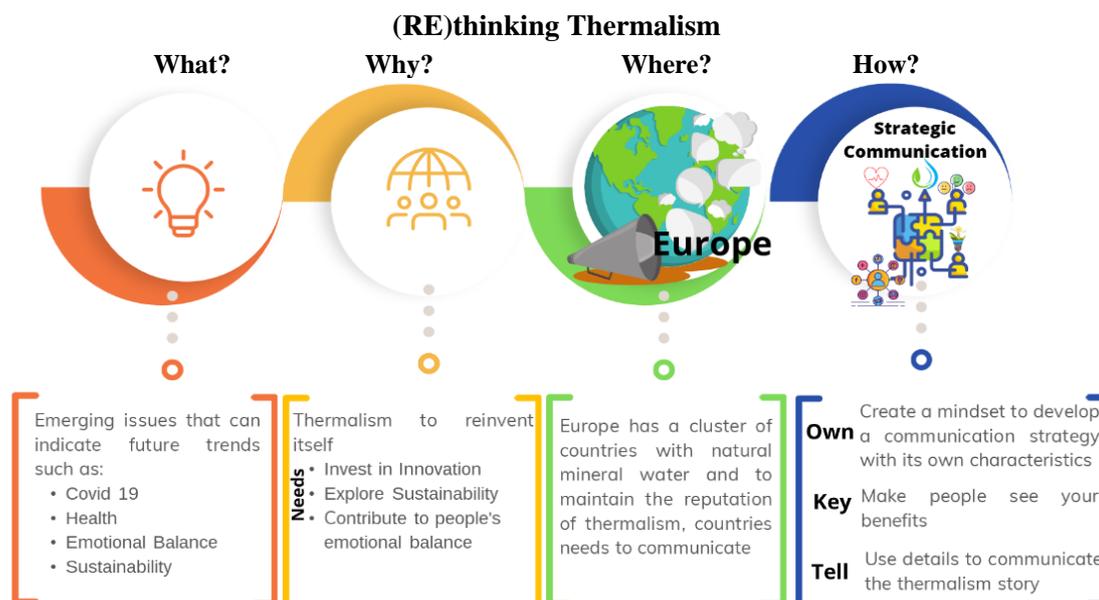


Figure 4. Conceptual Model (Source: Elaborated by the authors)

The need to rethink thermalism led to the formulation of four questions: "What?", "Why?", "Where?" and "How?" Starting by answering the "What?" – as there are emerging issues detailed in these articles capable of indicating future trends for thermalism demand; Szromek (2020) addresses Covid 19, Dillette et al. (2020) approach health and emotional balance and Mijajlovic et al. (2020), Szromek (2020), Szromek and Naramski (2019) and Szromek and Wybranczyk (2019) mention concerns for the environment. Coronaviruses mainly affect the respiratory systems of those infected and thermal springs may serve as a prevention or cure. In addition, water, the key resource for thermalism, is not a carrier for the spread of disease, a factor that is also relevant for the destination's safety (Navarrete and Shaw, 2021). In addition, we share the opinion of Brandão et al. (2021) who refer to three main reasons for seeking thermal tourism: (i) the increase in the average longevity of populations, associated with the increase in the number of elderly people travelling; (ii) the migration to large cities and the distance from nature, which causes psychosomatic imbalances (stress, anxiety, depression, among others); and (iii) sedentarism, unhealthy eating habits and incorrect body postures as well as problems caused by the civilisational crisis affecting the most developed countries, which translate into significant increases in loneliness and the associated

affective, emotional and spiritual crises. From this perspective, thermalism emerges as a space for renewing physical and emotional balance and for updating socialisation, lifestyles and social identities.

Why?" – Thermalism is an expanding sector and there is a need to make its characteristics and benefits visible through an operational communication strategy. The articles analysed resulted in three clusters, which are aligned with the proposal for a differentiated communication strategy for thermal tourism to achieve a new positioning in Europe. As our main results, we conclude that rethinking thermal tourism requires resorting to innovation to create new and efficient business models, differentiated by sustainable policies and natural environments for mutual benefits as in the studies by Dillette et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2019. This new approach, with services providing a mix of health, well-being and pleasure, through natural mineral water, will provide the tourist with an emotional balance to be well in life and to be successful personally and professionally (Kim et al., 2017). This proactive vision, with its focus on quality, is key to maintaining position in the growing wellness tourism market. Basing business models on assumptions of sustainable development (Smith and Puczko, 2015; Szromek, 2020; Szromek and Wybranczyk, 2019), uniqueness (Szromek and Naramski, 2019) and differentiation (Alen et al., 2014) has become a priority factor to build competitive and differentiating advantages for the thermal sector.

To raise awareness and increase the profitability of thermal spas, an operational communication strategy is needed for different thermal destination countries to attract as many tourists as possible. While Heung and Kucukusta (2013) identify the most effective methods to promote health and wellness tourism, such as social media advertising, government support and the organisation of new regional events, (Pan et al., 2019) report that the communication strategies deployed should remain realistic, direct and convey a healthy lifestyle to tourists. This also involves deploying social media to communicate the benefits of thermalism (Clark-Kennedy and Cohen, 2017; Pforr and Locher, 2012). Molleda and Kochhar (2015) share the view that strategic communication research should analyse political, social and economic factors for tourism organisations or destinations. In-depth research guides organisations to deal with environmental complexity and reinforces the need to create a clear brand identity. According to Estevão and Costa (2020), marketing and advertising play an important role in restoring the tourist destination's image. In this sense, reinventing thermal tourism requires investing in comprehensive strategic communication that meets the challenges of strategic planning and the effective execution of communication campaigns. Communication functions, such as public relations, advertising and marketing, provide support to all types of sectors and industries, both in domestic markets and across borders that thermal tourism also responds to (Molleda and Kochhar, 2015).

"Where?" - The countries involved in the articles analysed are concentrated in Europe as this represents a geography clustering thermal water destinations, including Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, Greece, Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Slovakia, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, England, Turkey and Iceland. This article strives to make a contribution to a theoretical reflection on thermalism in general and in Europe in particular. In one period, thermal baths were frequented mostly by the European nobility and high society in Europe. (Tang et al., 2021). Currently and according to Stevens et al. (2018), thermalism is enjoying a global resurgence of interest as consumers seek out ethical, natural, and place-based wellness experiences. In Europe, the healing success rate of thermalism has maintained the high reputation of thermal springs with curative powers. The tourist type is now more extensive but also more demanding and there is a need to invest in thermal tourism in Europe to maintain thermalism's reputation alongside the need for countries to communicate with each other.

"How?" - Our analysis demonstrates how the essence of thermalism can not only be maintained but also multiplied and thereby contributing to a more efficient communication of just what thermalism is. This analysis also demonstrates how strategic clusters interlink with communication through appropriately selecting the content. This requires ascertaining the best means of communicating the uniqueness of natural mineral water and the beauty of the surrounding nature, the location of each territory, including the respective culture, traditions and gastronomy, and the benefits for physical, mental and spiritual health (Clark-Kennedy and Cohen, 2017; Heung and Kucukusta, 2013; Huijbens, 2011; Smith, 2015; Stevens et al., 2018). Through economic, environmental and social sustainability, thermal territories should be promoted through focusing on geotourism and geothermal tourism, valuing and protecting water as the main endogenous resource of thermalism (Chrobak et al., 2020; Noviello and Smetkiewicz, 2019; Szromek, 2020; Szromek and Nanaramski, 2019; Szromek and Wybranczyk, 2019). According to Anaya-Aguilar et al. (2021), Joukes and Gerry (2010), technologies integrated into the strategy of promoting health and wellness tourism represent the most efficient means of communication.

Based on the instigatory theory of Oliveira (2019), thermalism communication also needs to perpetuate and trigger behavioural changes in people. This research seeks to look at the specificities of thermal tourism and to come up with solutions for the communicative process and actions in the future. This analysis thus sheds new light on the dynamics of how communication should be produced as knowledge for full exposure and recognition. This demonstrates the need to conduct detailed analysis of communication in thermalism to fully understand the wealth of the interrelated forms of tourism discourse on thermalism whether as a whole or on its constituent parts. According to Hallahan et al. (2007), for the field of strategic communication to evolve into a mature scientific field, this needs researchers to conscientiously and thoroughly work on this field with this study making a clear contribution to this goal.

## CONCLUSIONS

This rigorous and in-depth analysis of the theme of thermalism has led us to conclude that there is an urgent need for the continuous updating of research on these emerging themes. The relationship between thermalism and communication is scarce and the publication of scientific articles in journals with a high impact factor is fundamental to communicating the scientific findings on this sector. We answered the first research question through cluster analysis - *What are the subjacent dimensions of thermalism emphasised in scientific publications?* The different approaches, including tourist behaviour; analysis of companies in the sector; destination images, diversity, benefits/ incentives for both companies

and tourists; business models and tourism development; sustainability, and communication and marketing strategies, lead us to conclude that to rethink thermalism in Europe requires analysis of all of these approaches in keeping with the future demands of tourism. According to Tang et al. (2021) and Navarrete and Shaw (2021), the pandemic caused by Covid 19 led to a public discussion about health, longevity and quality of life, opening the door to thermal spas and generating new opportunities for the sector. Therefore, we also conclude that the valorisation of companies and establishments that provide sustainable products and services, that promote healthy lifestyles, such as using local products and untreated raw materials, is not a fashion but rather a trend. Tourists are increasingly concerned about their health and thus favour, above all, options in the tourism service range that best contribute to their health and well-being.

Answering the second question - *What is the relationship between strategic communication and thermal tourism?* All the studies, in many different ways, refer to communication as fundamental for the promotion and management of the relationships between thermal services/products/destinations, evoking communication as the main strategy for developing the sector. Although the focus of the articles does not fall on communication, all the researchers perceive this area as the means for a better projection of thermal tourism. Furthermore, we may conclude that communication strategies, focused on the characteristics of thermalism can be produced and maintained through selecting the means of communication that make thermalism both more visible and better understood. This study contributes to the identification of operationalised strategies and guidelines with an impact in terms of the publications that may outline promising future research paths. This research also discusses the implications of predictive factors for developing communication and marketing strategies that lead people to view thermalism in a more "operational" and "autochthonous" way.

According to Brandão et al. (2021), this importantly involves improving communication about the health and wellbeing experiences on offer as well as communicating their benefits. We thus conclude that the beneficial effects of thermal cures have been well known ever since ancient times, however, it is necessary to sustain them through scientific knowledge and raise their profiles through instigatory communication strategies. The analysis also highlights the importance of further research into thermal spas, with a particular focus on communication as this is a sector with great growth potential. It is hoped these findings will motivate other researchers to conduct further empirical studies on thermalism. In fact, the very role of researchers involves understanding, analysing and promoting a more operational vision of strategic communication in thermal tourism. The study limitations include the fact that we only considered journal articles and from two databases. As a future research path, we would suggest extending the theme to brand communication studies of thermal destinations and carrying out qualitative studies on the communication strategies deployed by thermal spas. In addition, to clarify the respective concepts requires carrying out research on the terms existing throughout the field of thermalism.

### Acknowledgements

This work is supported by national funds, through the FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under the project: Scholarship number: 2020.05207.BD; by national funds through NECE – Research Unit in Business Sciences funded by the Multiannual Funding Programme of R&D Centres of FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, under the project UIDB/04630/2020 and by national funds through Labcom – Research Unit in Communication and Arts funded by the Multiannual Funding Programme of R&D Centres of FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, under the project UIDP/00661/2020.

### REFERENCES

- Alen, E., De Carlos, P., & Dominguez, T. (2014). An analysis of differentiation strategies for Galician thermal centres. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 17(6), 499-517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2012.733357>
- Alina-Cerasela, A. (2015). Spa Tourism - A Comparative Analysis On Spain And Romania. *Balneo Research Journal*, 6(3), 199-207. <https://doi.org/10.12680/balneo.2015.1106>
- Anaya-Aguilar, R., Gemar, G., & Anaya-Aguilar, C. (2021). Usability Analysis of Andalusian Spas' Websites. *Sustainability*, 13(4). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042307>
- Beriatos, E., & Papageorgiou, M. (2009). Towards sustainable spa tourism activities in Greece. *Sustainable Development and Planning Iv, Vols 1 and 2*, 120, 773-781. <https://doi.org/10.2495/Sdp090712>
- Brandão, F., Liberato, D., Teixeira, A.S., & Liberato, P. (2021). Motives for Thermal Tourism: An Application to North and Central Portugal. *Sustainability*, 13(22), 12688. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212688>
- Chrobak, A., Ugolini, F., Pearlmutter, D., & Raschi, A. (2020). Thermal Tourism and Geoheritage: Examining Visitor Motivations and Perceptions. *Resources-Basel*, 9(5). <https://doi.org/ARTN 5810.3390/resources9050058>
- Clark-Kennedy, J., & Cohen, M. (2017). Indulgence or therapy? Exploring the characteristics, motivations and experiences of hot springs bathers in Victoria, Australia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 22(5), 501-511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2016.1276946>
- Costa, J., Varum, C., Montenegro, M., & Gomes, J. (2022). Measuring tourism success: are we on the brink of a new paradigm? *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 14(1), 3-7. <https://doi.org/10.1108/WHATT-10-2021-0130>
- Dillette, A.K., Douglas, A.C., & Andrzejewski, C. (2020). Dimensions of holistic wellness as a result of international wellness tourism experiences. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(6), 794-810. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1746247>
- Emanoil, M., & Fraticiu, L. (2013). Efficient Organizational Communication-A Key to Success. *Studies in Business and Economics*.
- Erfurt, P., & Cooper, M. (2009). *Health and wellness tourism: Spas and hot springs*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/9781845411138>
- Esiyok, B., Kurtulmusoglu, F.B., & Ozdemir, A. (2018). Heterogeneity in the determinants of length of stay across middle age and senior age groups in thermal tourism. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 35(4), 531-540. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2017.1374906>
- Estevão, C., & Costa, C. (2020). Natural disaster management in tourist destinations: a systematic literature review. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 25, 2502. <https://ejtr.vumk.eu/index.php/about/article/view/417>
- Gómez Pérez, C.P., González Soutelo, S., Mourelle Mosqueira, M.L., & Legido Soto, J.L. (2019). Spa techniques and technologies: from the past to the present [Article]. *Sustainable Water Resources Management*, 5(1), 71-81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40899-017-0136-1>
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining Strategic Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1, 3-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244>

- Heung, V.C.S., & Kucukusta, D. (2013). Wellness Tourism in China: Resources, Development and Marketing. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 15(4), 346-359. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.1880>
- Huijbens, E.H. (2011). Developing Wellness in Iceland. Theming Wellness Destinations the Nordic Way. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 11(1), 20-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2011.525026>
- Joukes, V., & Gerry, C. (2010). Website Effectiveness in Wellness Promotion By Portuguese Spas [Article]. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 17(1), 136-143. <https://doi.org/10.1375/jhtm.17.1.136>
- Kim, E., Chiang, L.L., & Tang, L. (2017). Investigating wellness tourists' motivation, engagement, and loyalty: in search of the missing link. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 34(7), 867-879. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2016.1261756>
- Liberato, D., Brandão, F., Teixeira, A.S., & Liberato, P. (2021). Satisfaction and loyalty evaluation towards health and wellness destination [Article]. *Journal of Tourism and Development*, 36(2), 9-24. <https://doi.org/10.34624/rtd.v2i36.24679>
- Lin, C.H. (2013). Determinants of Revisit Intention to a Hot Springs Destination: Evidence from Taiwan. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 18(3), 183-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2011.640698>
- Liu, M.T.C., Liu, Y.D., Mo, Z.Y., & Ng, K.L. (2021). Using text mining to track changes in travel destination image: the case of Macau. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 33(2), 373-395. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APjml-08-2019-0477>
- Medina-Munoz, D.R., & Medina-Munoz, R.D. (2013). Critical issues in health and wellness tourism: an exploratory study of visitors to wellness centres on Gran Canaria. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 16(5), 415-435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2012.748719>
- Mijajlovic, M., Puska, A., Stevic, Z., Marinkovic, D., Doljanica, D., Jovanovic, S.V., Stojanovic, I., & Besirovic, J. (2020). Determining the Competitiveness of Spa-Centers in Order to Achieve Sustainability Using a Fuzzy Multi-Criteria Decision-Making Model. *Sustainability*, 12(20). <https://doi.org/ARTN 858410.3390/su12208584>
- Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., & Altman, D.G. (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. *Plos Medicine*, 6(7), e1000097. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097>
- Molleda, J., & Kochhar, S. (2015). Global Strategic Communication From the Lens of Coordination Control, Standardization, and Localization. In D. Holtzhausen & A. Zerfass (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, Taylor & Francis ed., 561-571.
- Mongeon, P., & Paul-Hus, A. (2016). The journal coverage of Web of Science and Scopus: a comparative analysis. *Scientometrics*, 106(1), 213-228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-015-1765-5>
- Mosqueira, M.L.M., Failde, R., Magariños, A., Eyzaguirre, F., & León, M. (2009). *Técnicas hidrotermales y estética del bienestar*. Ediciones Paraninfo S.A..
- Navarrete, A.P., & Shaw, G. (2021). Spa tourism opportunities as strategic sector in aiding recovery from Covid-19: The Spanish model. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 21(2), 245-250. <https://doi.org/ARTN146735842097062610.1177/1467358420970626>
- Noviello, M., & Smetkiewicz, K. (2019). The Revitalisation of Thermal Areas in the Bagnoli District (Naples) as a Chance for Tourism Development in the Campania Region in the Context of Selected European Experiences. *Quaestiones Geographicae*, 38(4), 119-131. <https://doi.org/10.2478/quaageo-2019-0042>
- Oliveira, E. (2019). *The Instigatory Theory of NGO Communication*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden, Germany. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26858-9>
- Pan, X.M., Yang, Z.P., Han, F., Lu, Y.Y., & Liu, Q. (2019). Evaluating Potential Areas for Mountain Wellness Tourism: A Case Study of Ili, Xinjiang Province. *Sustainability*, 11(20). <https://doi.org/ARTN566810.3390/su11205668>
- Pelegrin-Borondo, J., Araujo-Vila, N., & Fraiz-Brea, J.A. (2020). Comparison of Spa Choice between Wellness Tourists and Healthcare/Medical Tourists. *Healthcare*, 8(4). <https://doi.org/ARTN544103390/healthcare8040544>
- Pfarr, C., & Locher, C. (2012). The German Spa and Health Resort Industry in the Light of Health Care System Reforms. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 29(3), 298-312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2012.666175>
- Rodrigues, H., Brochado, A., & Troilo, M. (2020). Listening to the murmur of water: essential satisfaction and dissatisfaction attributes of thermal and mineral spas. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 37(5), 649-661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2019.1633986>
- Sipayung, E.M., Fiarni, C., & Febrian, M. (2021). Implementation of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) in Wellness and Beauty Tourism Industry. International Conference on Electrical Engineering, Computer Science and Informatics (EECSI),
- Smith, M. (2015). Baltic Health Tourism: Uniqueness and Commonalities. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 15(4), 357-379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2015.1024819>
- Smith, M., & Puczko, L. (2015). More than a special interest: defining and determining the demand for health tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 40(2), 205-219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2015.1045364>
- Song, X., Mo, Z., Liu, M.T., Niu, B., & Huang, L. (2021). Cooperator or supporter: how can cross-boundary Macau-Zhuhai metropolis promote regional tourism together? *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print). <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-02-2021-0137>
- Stefko, R., Jencova, S., & Vasanicova, P. (2020). The Slovak Spa Industry and Spa Companies: Financial and Economic Situation. *Journal of Tourism and Services*, 11(20), 28-43. <https://doi.org/10.29036/jots.v11i20.137>
- Stevens, F., Azara, I., & Michopoulou, E. (2018). Local community attitudes and perceptions towards thermalism. *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*, 1(1), 55-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2018.1432451>
- Szromek, A.R. (2020). Model of Business Relations in Spa Tourism Enterprises and Their Business Environment. *Sustainability*, 12(12). <https://doi.org/ARTN494110.3390/su12124941>
- Szromek, A.R., & Naramski, M. (2019). A Business Model in Spa Tourism Enterprises: Case Study from Poland. *Sustainability*, 11(10). <https://doi.org/ARTN 288010.3390/su11102880>
- Szromek, A.R., & Wybranczyk, K. (2019). Proposal of Value for Customer of Spas: Expectations of Spa Patients and Tourist in Polish Spas. *Sustainability*, 11(13). <https://doi.org/ARTN 359810.3390/su11133598>
- Tang, I., Chan, E., Chew-Tan, T., & Leung, R. (2021). Asian Millennials' views on thermal baths – from medical to wellness service experiences. *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*, 3, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2021.1881353>
- Vila, N.A., Brea, J.A.F., & Borondo, J.P. (2021). Applying the UTAUT2 Model to a Non-Technological Service: The Case of Spa Tourism. *Sustainability*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/ARTN 80310.3390/su13020803>
- Walton, J.K. (2014). Family firm, health resort and industrial colony: The grand hotel and mineral springs at Mondariz Balneario, Spain, 1873-1932. *Business History*, 56(7), 1037-1056. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2013.839661>
- Wang, Y.H. (2015). The Development Mode and Trend Analysis of Domestic Mineral Water and Spas Tourism. *2015 2nd International Conference on Creative Education (ICCE 2015), Pt 2, 11*, 270-274. <Go to ISI>://WOS:000380579500050
- Zunic, L., Bidzan-Gekic, A., & Gekic, H. (2019). Balneological Classification of Thermomineral, Thermal and Mineral Waters at the Region of Ilidza-Sarajevo and Its Impact on Tourism. *Ad Alta-Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 9(1), 336-342. <Go to ISI>://WOS:000474385400061