

A Theoretical Reflection on the Importance of Branding to Promote Thermal Destinations

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Abstract: Based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), the aim of this article is to present a conceptual approach to the importance of communication in thermal destinations. Through an in-depth analysis of scientific publications, characteristics of thermalism are identified that may be important for the creation of a brand strategy to promote thermal destinations. An SLR was conducted, using the PRISMA Statement method, carried out in May 2021 using the Web of Science and Scopus databases. A total of 133 articles were found, of which only 31 were used for the qualitative analysis. EndNote20 and Nvivo software were used to identify the articles for the study, their analysis and systematisation of the collected information. The results, among others, identified important characteristics of thermalism, presenting a framework of destination attributes in the international context of thermalism. By elaborating a conceptual model contributes to identifying operationalised strategies and guidelines impacting on publications for the strategic creation of a thermal destination brand. The main contribution of this study is to leverage the characteristics of thermalism to generate unique and differentiating brands that reflect the way customers perceive them, providing relevant findings for better understanding of the destination perspective in the international thermal tourism context for future research and the practices of a destination's tourism communication strategy. The analysis highlights the need to develop further knowledge in a sector with great potential for growth, the thermalism.

Keywords: tourism destination, branding strategy, strategic communication, thermalism

1. Introduction

Thermalism has gained importance 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 (Majeed and Ramkissoon, 2020). A rigorous and in-depth analysis of the research produced on thermalism led Antunes et al. (2021) to conclude on an urgent need for research on emerging themes in communication related to thermalism, through the publication of scientific articles in journals with a high impact factor. This article will adopt a conceptual approach to the definitions integrated in the thermal destinations and analyse the importance of branding as a potential instrument for the development of a tourist destination.

Branding is studied in various academic disciplines. Its impact on strategic development plays a vital role in a destination's transformation processes. From this perspective and to increase understanding about the importance of branding, this research presents an SLR that combines the attributes of destination, thermalism and communication. The aim is to present a conceptual approach to the importance of communication in thermal destinations. It is also intended to analyse scientific publications and to identify characteristics of thermalism that may be relevant for the strategic creation of a brand for thermal destinations. For this purpose, the following research questions were raised: *What are the main themes highlighted in scientific publications related to thermalism? What characteristics of thermalism, identified in the SLR, could be integrated in the creation of a brand strategy for thermal destinations?*

The SLR was developed using the PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) method, because it uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select and critically appraise relevant research and collect and analyse data from studies included in the review (Higgins et al., 2011). The literature on branding applied to thermal destinations is scarce and recent. The interdisciplinary nature of thermalism, involving health sciences, life and earth sciences, exact sciences and social sciences, poses challenges for the development of a coherent knowledge base. Through the central themes of the scientific publications under analysis, we sought characteristics of thermalism and developed a conceptual model, supported by four pillars for the strategic creation of a brand for thermal destinations.

This article is subdivided into a theoretical approach to the main themes related to thermalism, communication and branding; a description of the methodology applied, the main results and their discussion, and finally, the conclusions, implications, limitations, and future lines of research.

2. Theoretical perspectives

Visiting thermal centres for medicinal purposes is one of the oldest forms of tourism in many parts of the world (Boekstein, 2014b). The reputation of thermalism for health and wellness benefits is maintained in the European tradition by qualified medical specialists with experience in applying treatments using natural hot springs (Erfurt and Cooper, 2009). Therefore, there is a need to understand the evolution and future of thermalism, exploring opportunities, identifying differentiating characteristics and driving market changes that fully integrate thermalism in its deeper meaning, rather than just being a trendy marketing label. Boekstein (2014a) recommends that developing countries create thermal tourism products that combine thermal water resources with site-specific healing methods and remedies, but also including surrounding natural and cultural attractions, and wherever possible, involving and benefiting local communities.

According to Boekstein (2014b), although all resorts have thermal water as their main attraction and all offer health and recreational activities, the core offering may differ from resort to resort and may have a focus on wellness along with medical treatments (e.g. Bad Wildbad and Blue Lagoon), or only wellness activities (e.g. Thermae Bath Spa, Hanmer Springs and Peninsula Hot Springs), or recreational activities (e.g. Warmbaths and Badplaas). The synergy between mineral and thermal waters for bathing and consumption and the possibility of developing new health product brands containing the natural resources of the thermal spa would stimulate local communities to improve their visibility and build a national brand bringing together a range of attributes and characteristics of the destination (Nistoreanu and Aluculesei, 2021). From this perspective, the creation of a brand should take into consideration a set of differentiating characteristics and also the positioning of a country's thermal spaces and resources. For Nistoreanu and Aluculesei (2021), the non-existence of a brand referring to water resources that can be associated with a balneotherapy product is a weak point for the thermal destinations. Although Romanian thermal spas are well-known and there is a long tradition of using them to improve health, there is no strong brand in the international market that can promote their potential in foreign countries, i.e., they have high visibility, but only at the local and national level. This is found in many countries with thermal tourism, which makes it difficult to implement new procedures, including the management of water resources and valorisation of thermalism worldwide.

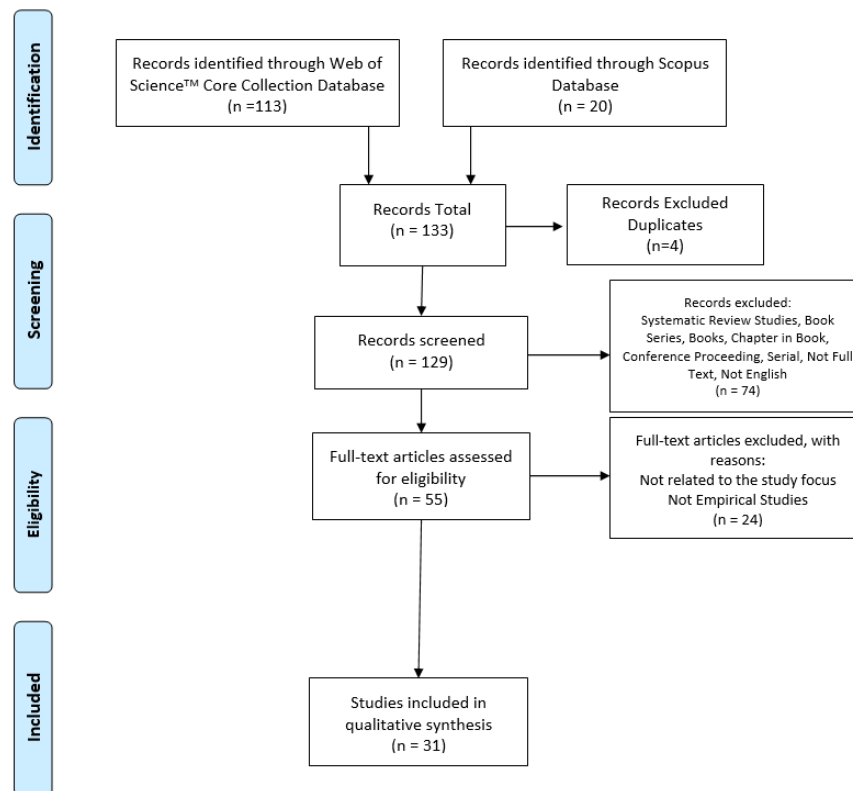
For Chang et al. (2012), destination branding comprises all the elements that lead tourists to form a brand impression of a destination, referring to the offer of products and services that tourists encounter when travelling. Listening carefully to tourists' perspectives and local contacts with the brand are key to achieving brand success, which creates a competitive advantage for tourist destinations. Aluculesei and Nistoreanu (2016) say that a destination's tourism heritage, represented by its wellness tourism resources, can represent an important tourism product, but it is necessary to know how to communicate in order to create value. Destination brand value creation has been recognised as a crucial tool for competitive advantage in the development of tourism destinations.

Currently, communication plays a strategic role in trying to influence and persuade tourism consumer behaviour in a multichannel offline and online context, which is both symmetrical and multidirectional. The growing number of platforms and social networks allow Internet users to collaborate, communicate, search and publish original content in various ways (Hays et al., 2013). Social networks are increasingly used to socialise; questions are answered on Wikis and chats; information is absorbed in newspapers, magazines and online radio; internet users can comment on the news and podcasts. Joukes and Gerry (2010) analysed the presence and use of the Internet in the Portuguese thermal industry. Their findings show there are opportunities to improve these sites' content and function to attract current and potential spa-goers. This being so, it is necessary to strengthen and investigate these approaches from a scientific perspective.

3. Methodology

The method used 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 in the course of the review (Moher et al., 2009). The SLR process carried out in May 2021 consisted of 4 steps. First, the keywords "strategic communication" OR "tourism communication" OR "corporate communication" AND "destination branding" OR "tourism

destination" AND "thermalism" OR "thermal tourism" OR "thermal spa" were identified to be used in the search in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. These were chosen because they cover several areas including Science and Technology, Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences. In addition, together, they broaden the search and reduce the possibility of bias in journals indexed exclusively in one of the databases, having the necessary breadth to be really comprehensive in any research (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016). In this stage, 133 articles were found. In the second, after careful screening, 4 duplicates were removed, and based on the exclusion and eligibility criteria defined to fine-tune the review, 74 articles were excluded due to being systematic review studies, book series, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, serial, not a full text, or not in english, and 24 full-text articles were excluded due to being unrelated to the study focus or not empirical studies. In the third phase, for abstraction and analysis, the abstracts were initially read and then the full texts, to identify the themes and sub-themes established. The last stage of the review resulted in 31 articles that were used for the qualitative analysis. EndNote20 and Nvivo software was used to identify the articles for the study, analyse them and systematize the information collected, according to the research objective.



Source: Adapted from (Moher et al., 2009)

Figure 1-The Flow Diagram of the Study

4. Results

In this section, the results of the study and a brief analysis are described. As this is an SLR, the results focus on content analysis.

Figure 2 shows an exploratory analysis of the word frequency through the representativeness of the 100 words, with more than 3 letters, most mentioned in the publications:

tourists in these destinations are interested in ancient traditions and rituals, natural resources and therapies, exclusive treatments and services that reflect the locality, important considerations for creating experiences, a destination brand and consequently loyalty. Finally, Beriatos and Papageorgiou (2008), Beriatos and Papageorgiou (2009), Duman and Kozak (2010), Heung and Kucukusta (2013), Huijbens (2011), Lindner et al. (2021), Liberato et al. (2020), Lee et al. (2009), Noviello and Smętkiewicz (2019), Papageorgiou and Beriatos (2011), Pillmayer et al. (2020), Smith (2015) and Ponte et al. (2020) investigate factors, resources and products, they sought to determine the attractiveness of a country for the **Territorial Development** of a thermal destination.

Besides its therapeutic efficiency (Silva et al., 2020), thermalism is an antidote to stress (Erfurt and Cooper, 2009). It is a product of excellence that contributes to a country's regional development and consequently to the proper functioning of the engine that promotes tourism in the world. From this perspective, and for a more operational view, the following figure presents a set of characteristics about thermalism, identified in the SLR, which can be transformed into smart clusters to provide well-being to people and support the creation of successful thermal destination brands.



Figure 3: Characteristics of thermalism identified in the publications

The collaborative method reveals that thermalism, has much to gain from a multidisciplinary approach (Ponte et al., 2020). Heung and Kucukusta (2013) identify the attributes needed to develop this niche market (environmental resources, including clean air, water and natural landscape). Lee et al. (2009) and Lee (2010) also state the need to innovate services, revitalise facilities and diversify the supply of tourism products and activities in order to respond to this new and emerging market opportunity. The potential for developing **Wellness** tourism makes perfect sense in terms of resourcing and promoting a thermal tourism destination. Natural hot springs, through **Thermal Water**, are unique, rare, and irreplaceable assets that have already been shown to be of significant economic value. Rodrigues et al. (2019) consider that listening to the murmur of water communicates emotions/ thermal experiences, this being the essence of thermalism. The unique attributes of thermalism should be branded and promoted with innovation in order to broaden and enrich the **Experience of** visitors to thermal springs. Chang et al. (2012) contribute to a model of experience exploration by identifying critical brand contact elements in tourist destinations, considering ethnic customs and natural landscapes as attractive quality requirements.

For Emir and Saraçlı (2011), it is essential to know the tourist and anticipate the sale, providing an emotional connection and arousing the desire to return to the destination. Smith and Puczko (2015) provide a detailed overview of the current health and wellness tourism profile, people who believe that wellness is an important part of their lifestyle, implementing the new concept of lifelong wellness, essential in helping to manage **Emotions**. Duman and Kozak (2010) and Thal et al. (2021) point out that a more holistic approach will meet the needs and desires of today's tourists. Alongside **Spirituality**, which is gaining prominence in this new era, as reinforced by many authors (Han et al., 2018, Heung and Kucukusta, 2013, Huijbens, 2011, Pillmayer et al., 2020, Rodrigues et al., 2019, Smith, 2015, Smith and Puczko, 2015, Thal et al., 2021). In the current worldwide pandemic, with sequels for many patients recovering from Covid and also in the economic sector, Campon-

Cerro et al. (2020), Chang et al. (2012), Dutheil et al. (2019a), Dutheil et al. (2019b), Huang et al. (2019) and Lee (2010) consider that both spas and thermal destinations have strong opportunities to assert their position as safe, healthy wellness destinations, with experiential tourism, **health** treatment and prevention being a particular strategy to create value in tourists and build loyalty.

In order to develop thermal destinations, according to Beriatos and Papageorgiou (2009), it is necessary to invest in **Sustainability**, through reliable and sustainable services that contribute to their attractiveness. Chrobak et al. (2020) propose a comprehensive model of thermalism, integrating **Environment**, through knowledge of the landscape and the scientific value of nearby geological features. Noviello and Smętkiewicz (2019) share the same opinion and reinforce the high social awareness regarding exploitation of the geothermal potential, a vision based on long-term plans with the implementation of sustainable development, local principles and policies, innovations, actions with local and regional communities, improving entrepreneurship, attracting investors and external resources. In summary, according to the above-mentioned authors, to develop a thermal tourism destination, it is necessary to create a brand based on a territory's values and attributes. There must be strategic planning to promote differentiated products, services, and activities for the thermal market, essentially based on memorable experiences for tourists.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This analysis aims to outline research trends in thermalism and address the main challenges currently facing the sector. Similarly to Buxton and Michopoulou (2021) and Antunes et al. (2021), who state that the thermal sector remains largely unexplored, this research intends to progress towards better understanding of the thermal context, exploring the characteristics of thermalism and their integration into natural landscapes as relevant factors for the development and creation of a brand strategy for thermal destinations. Although few in number, the articles reviewed provide a good perspective on the development of the important factors of the thermalism industry, which are fundamental to this discussion. According to Boekstein (2014a), as this apparent metamorphosis of thermalism occurs, it may be timely to reflect on the role thermal tourism has played in many countries for a long time, in some cases thousands of years. This study shows the need for more conscious communication of what thermalism is and highlights the importance of creating brands for thermal destinations to increase countries' visibility both nationally and internationally. One of the main contributions of this article lies in the proposed conceptual model, presented in the figure below, as a result of analysing the scientific articles in the SLR, as well as complementary, updated research and in-depth reading on destination branding:



Figure 4: Conceptual model

The literature on brands is very broad, and despite the growing importance of destination brands, most conceptual and empirical research has focused on destination images. We propose the ICTS model supported by 4 pillars that can assist industry professionals in strategic creation of brands for thermal destinations through four key issues. This model emerges from the main factors, themes and characteristics identified in the SLR, and is supported by Lederer and Hill (2001) who present a new mapping tool "the brand portfolio molecule", revealing how brands appear to customers. These researchers' study is divided into three important phases: first they identify the brands for the study, then they classify the brands through key questions, and finally, they use 3D modelling or the traditional method (hand, paper, and pen) to map the molecule, that is, to create brands with unique and differentiating characteristics that reflect how customers see them. This tool stimulates a new way of thinking about brand strategy.

From this perspective, to create thermal destination brands, the proposed model has four phases that anticipate the launch of a brand and should answer the questions asked in each pillar, serving as a guide for future research:

Brand Identity: *What are the main characteristics identifying the destination that may lead to a decision to visit?* In this phase, brand identity should be created, which means creating a brand that stands out in consumers' minds. Heung and Kucukusta (2013) and Lee et al. (2009) identified attributes considered necessary to develop this niche market. Huijbens (2011) identified nature-oriented wellness images, outdoor experience, and pleasure, combined with personal fulfilment, healthy local cuisine, local culture and clean air, nature and water emerged as essential attributes to create a tourist destination brand. Brand consistency is people's image of a particular place, which can be evoked by the mere mention of the name. However, the great challenge for thermal destinations is to identify the main characteristics, achieve global recognition and a positive national reputation in order to attract visitors.

Brand Connect: *How does the brand connect with other similar destination brands and the people visiting the destination?*

Brand resonance is the degree to which consumers believe they are connected to the brand and in tune with it. On the one hand, Chang et al. (2012) refer to the importance of the satisfaction model as the top priority for brand contact. Emir and Saraçlı (2011) and Thal et al. (2021) on the other hand, mention employee skills as a key factor. Then again, concerning thermalism, we talk about experiences, and according to Campon-Cerro et al. (2020), water-based tourism activities imply a healthy purpose, as is the case of thermal tourism, which can lead to significant results, such as satisfaction, loyalty and quality of life, and therefore connection. At this stage, it is important to evaluate each of the characteristics suggested in the results to ensure the efficiency of the strategies and their connection.

Technology: *Which online communication channels have the greatest impact on the brand?*

As brand presence appears in an increasing number of online platforms, its impact will also be greater. For Anaya-Aguilar et al. (2021b), Joukes and Gerry (2010) and Pillmayer et al. (2020), technologies are integrated into the value chain in promoting health and wellness tourism, and this has received some attention from researchers in the field. However, according to the authors whose studies focus on evaluating the information available on thermal spas' websites, guidelines need to be developed to promote their products and services effectively. According to Anaya-Aguilar et al. (2021b), the websites analysed in the study do not use two-way communication in real time, and taking into account current demands, implementation is urgent. Heung and Kucukusta (2013) identify other effective methods to promote health and wellness tourism, such as social media advertising, government support and organising regional events. At this stage, technology is an important factor to consider when creating a destination brand, identifying the most suitable channels for its promotion.

Brand Sensory: *What are residents, tourists and visitors' emotional responses and reactions to the brand?*

Customers' emotional responses and reactions to the brand make the brand receptive. Here, it is important to assess the impact and understand which emotions are intrinsic to the experience. In their relationship with the brand, Schmitt et al. (2009) distinguished several dimensions of experience and built a brand experience scale including four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral. The scale is reliable, valid, and distinct from other brand measures, including brand evaluations, brand engagement, brand attachment, customer delight, and brand personality. Furthermore, brand experience affects consumer satisfaction and loyalty directly and indirectly through brand personality associations. The study by Rodrigues et al. (2019) concluded that to leverage the demand for thermal spas and expand the thermal destinations, entrepreneurs and local governments must develop services and products that merge unique environments, local traditions and local specificities with world-class built environments and services that drive spa-goers' satisfaction. In this phase we propose to listen to people after contacting the brand and analyse their feelings.

This model suggests that before creating a destination brand, these steps should be implemented. If the brand communication ensures a relevant and correct connection with the different target groups, based on the relationship between attitude and perception of the destination and thermal experience, the strategy for creating a brand for thermal destinations will be more efficient.

Concluding, in an attempt to organise the proposed ideas, it was immediately evident that the answer could not be simple and obvious when research in the area of thermalism and communication is scarce. One of the questions raised was identification of the main themes in scientific publications. The second question concerned the characteristics of thermalism that could be assimilated to create a brand strategy for thermal destinations. The answers were organised in two major axes: According to the SLR, contributing to the evolution of thermalism are factors such as: Digital Communication; Experience Tourism; Product Innovation; Skills Management; Tourist Behaviour and Territorial Development, the main themes of the articles analysed.

The door to evolution could be opened by various challenges, but to answer the second question raised, among the various "keys" to that door, Noviello and Smętkiewicz (2019), Chrobak et al. (2020) and Beriatis and Papageorgiou (2009) indicate sustainability, through using thermal sources as a renewable (clean and economical) geothermal resource. Other characteristics were also highlighted such as: Health, Wellness, Spirituality, Emotions, Thermal Water, Environment and Experiences. Professionals of communication should focus on the model ICTS and these characteristics to create destination brands that form ties with people and with destinations with similar missions. We share the same opinion as Buxton and Michopoulou (2021), who argue that the consumption and production of experiences is central to understanding value creation in wellness service contexts. Erfurt and Cooper (2009) say that different countries, customs, cultures, and traditions have similarities in the use of water, since the resource is ubiquitous. However, almost regardless of culture, many hot springs have become known for their miraculous healing powers and still have at least one story or legend that supports the original healing event. Therefore, cultural history associated with innovation is an integral part of the communication strategy to maintain a thermal destination's reputation over time (Chang et al., 2012, Lee et al., 2009, Lee, 2010).

6. Implications, limitations and future research

This study contributes to the literature by providing a theoretical framework of excellence in thermalism and by elaborating a conceptual model to identifying operationalised strategies and guidelines that have an impact when creating a brand for thermal destinations. The main contribution of this research is to leverage the characteristics of thermalism to generate unique and differentiating brands that reflect the way customers perceive them. From a communication perspective, this study discusses the implications of predictive factors in developing communication and marketing strategies that enhance the positive image of a destination and consequently attract tourists.

A limitation was the fact that only 2 databases were considered and only journal articles were included. Our research addresses the current scarcity of academic work on the importance of branding applied to thermal destinations and the lack of relevant strategic models for the diffusion / promotion of a destination. The analysis highlights the need to develop knowledge further in a sector with great growth potential: thermalism. It is hoped that the results will motivate other researchers to conduct further empirical studies on communication in thermalism. As future lines of research, the following research questions were raised: What are the main characteristics identifying the destination that could lead to the decision to visit? Which online communication channels have the greatest impact on the brand? What are people's (residents, tourists, and visitors) emotional responses and reactions to the brand? How does the brand connect to other similar destination brands and the people visiting the destination? The thermal destination brand should reflect a set of characteristics that, through communication, should be transmitted to people and institutions, to achieve a positioning of excellence and capture a greater share of international markets.

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