

# A theoretical reflection on thermalism and communication: future perspectives in times of crisis

Importance of communication for thermalism

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is through a systematic literature review (SLR) to present a conceptual approach to the importance of communication for thermalism. An in-depth analysis of scientific publications provides a conceptual understanding about the definition of thermalism and the importance of communication in the thermal sector. The intention is also to identify the major challenges for communication in thermalism in times of crisis. The literature on conceptual approaches in the field of thermalism is almost non-existent, and this is an important contribution of the research presented.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To achieve the objectives, an SLR was carried out, through the Preferred Reporting Items Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) Statement method, using the Web of Science and Scopus databases. A total of 139 articles were found, of which only 26 were used for the qualitative analysis. EndNote 20 and Nvivo software were used to identify the articles for the study, their analysis and systematization of the collected information.

**Findings** – The results, among others, through an in-depth analysis of scientific publications, clarified the definition of thermalism and provided relevant results for better understanding of the importance of the dimensions of communication for thermalism.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research addresses the current scarcity of academic work on the importance of communication applied to a thermal destination and the lack of relevant strategic models for the diffusion/promotion of a destination. Finally, a limitation was the fact that only 2 databases were considered and only journal articles were included. As a future line of research the authors propose extending the theme to thermal tourism experiences. In addition, scientific studies focusing on water-based experiences connected with thermalism are almost non-existent and very relevant for the future of the sector, as well as studies in the area of communication with the following research questions: where do tourists consult information when choosing a travel destination? and what are the appropriate communication channels to reach the thermal market? We close this reflection by concluding that the thermal tradition, through the know-how of the medical class, the properties of thermal waters and the cultural history associated with its early days, stimulated more recently by implementing innovations, will regain its role in preserving health and well-being through thermal water and the exploitation of territories' endogenous resources. These factors are the basis through which communication sciences can create strategies adapted to each country to promote a thermal destination brand.

**Practical implications** – Research in tourism destination management has provided solutions, through communication, to problems that are faced daily by countries, and the authors hope this research also contributes to the recovery of thermal tourism destinations in times of crisis. It is also from this perspective that

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based on the main themes and dimensions of communication identified in the SLR that the authors propose the Corporate, Organisational, Skills, Management and Online (COSMO) model to help promote resilient thermal destinations prepared for future crises. The diversity and originality of this research model will be useful for destination promoters, spa managers and communication professionals.

**Social implications** – This study contributes to the literature by providing a theoretical framework of excellence in thermalism. One possible way to solve the ambiguity of terms related to thermalism is to consider another more comprehensive term as a combination of different approaches. The aim is not to create an academic division, but rather to contribute to better conceptual understanding, from a theoretical and paradigmatic perspective, of what thermalism is. Here, a new targeted and more comprehensive concept emerges, which from the academic perspective of communication sciences will lead to prevention for a new way of feeling good with life, contributing to promoting thermal destinations in the world with a greater understanding.

**Originality/value** – For better understanding of the concepts, this study proposes a new definition of thermalism. As research related to thermal destinations, through communication management contributes to attract tourists, promote experiences, provide the human capital of the sector with skills and create authentic and resilient place brands. It is from this perspective that the model was proposed, based on the dimensions of communication related to the main themes obtained through the SLR. This model supports a plurality of communication strategies, with different characteristics and objectives but which meet a collective purpose: to disseminate information about thermalism, in order to build collective knowledge to promote thermal destinations. The analysis highlights the need for further research into thermalism, with special focus on communication.

**Keywords** Tourism destination, Branding, Strategic communication, Thermalism

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic had negative consequences for people's health and many economic sectors, which stimulated a rethinking of traditional models of living, communication being the best strategy to manage a crisis and support people in making decisions (Liu *et al.*, 2021b). According to Buxton and Michopoulou (2021) the recent growth of global health and wellness tourism is fuelled by people's increasing interest in pursuing wellness. Choi *et al.* (2015) report that in response to the current emphasis on health and wellness in modern society, the thermal sector has experienced rapid growth over the past two decades. However, this type of tourism faces a multitude of challenges and one of them is the discrepancy in its conceptual approaches and definitions (Quintela *et al.*, 2016). According to Erfurt and Cooper (2009), thermalism's reputation as beneficial for health and well-being stems from the European tradition of qualified medical specialists with experience in applying treatments using natural hot springs. A rigorous, in-depth analysis of thermalism and communication, led Antunes *et al.* (2021) to conclude on an urgent need for continuous updating of research on emerging themes, through publishing scientific articles in journals with a high impact factor.

Leite *et al.* (2021) consider that thermal resources have an added value and can offer a multitude of genuine products and experiences sustained by their anchor product, natural mineral water and that communication is the tool to make this sector viable. Nowadays, it is possible to communicate to hundreds, thousands of people, without great investment, but it is necessary to know how to do so and manage this communication correctly (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). This research presents a systematic literature review (SLR) that combines thermalism and communication. The aim is to provide a conceptual understanding about the definition of thermalism and understand and analyse the importance of communication in the thermal sector. It is also intended to identify the major challenges for communication in thermalism in times of crisis. To this end, the following research questions were raised:

RQ1. Is the definition of thermalism consensual among all researchers?

RQ2. What are the underlying dimensions of communication highlighted in scientific publications?

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RQ3. What are the big issues for the communication of a thermal tourism destination in pandemic times?

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The Preferred Reporting Items Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) statement method was considered the most effective methodology for conducting this research (Higgins *et al.*, 2011). Despite growing interest in digital communication, the interdisciplinary nature of the field poses challenges for the development of a coherent knowledge base and through the central themes of the scientific publications under analysis; we sought to develop a conceptual map of the interaction between them. This article will contribute to academic reflection and better understanding of communication of the thermal sector.

After a brief introduction, the article is structured in four parts: the first adopts a theoretical approach to themes related to thermalism and communication; the second describes the methodology applied; the third presents the results and finally, the implications, conclusions, limitations and future lines of research are presented.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

### 2.1 *What is thermalism?*

Thermalism is one of the oldest types of tourism. Puczko and Bachvarov (2006) found many definitions of health tourism and spas, which reinforces the importance of clarifying the definition of thermalism to characterise the experience more easily. From this perspective, Mosqueira *et al.* (2009) suggest three classifications for centres according to the type of water: (1) thermal centres, which use mineral waters for preventive and therapeutic purposes; (2) spas that offer hydrothermal and beauty techniques using tap water, with or without additives and (3) thalassotherapy centres, which use sea water and marine elements for preventive and therapeutic purposes. Taking as a reference the approach of Erfurt and Cooper (2009) who suggest segmentation of important definitions within this theme, we conducted a search with definitions related to thermalism. For Alina-Cerasela (2015), thermal tourism is on the border between wellness tourism and medical tourism, depending on the resources employed to satisfy the needs for wellness, medical benefits or both, according to the needs and desires of a large segment of tourists. Hall (2011) says that spa tourism can be defined as a part of health tourism, providing specific services including mineral and thermal waters. Jahić and Selimović (2015) defines the thermalism is a narrower concept than health tourism and implies being held in a thermal spa in order to treat certain diseases, improve psycho-physical health or relax the body.

Thermalism has been exploring new opportunities and thermal spaces are emerging with new concepts which, according to Navarrete and Shaw (2020), Mijajlovic *et al.* (2020) and Szromek (2020) include integrated, holistic and sustainable approaches, such as development and community atmospheres, personal growth and gastronomic experiences. This approach integrates all the activities developed around thermal spas that can attract a new public and new ways of looking at thermalism. Despite the evolution, thermal treatments are an important therapeutic tool supported by centuries of experience and numerous scientific studies proving their effectiveness (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2019; Silva *et al.*, 2020). The water emerges with a healthy purpose (Gössling *et al.*, 2012; Anaya-Aguilar *et al.*, 2021b) and for Campon-Cerro *et al.* (2020), tourism products that link water and health are a response to modern tourists increasingly interested in living better.

### 2.2 *The importance of the experience in creating a thermal destination brand*

Hot springs are highly sought after all over the world for their relaxation benefits. The effect of water vibration is one thing that makes them so pleasant (Emoto, 2014). Some authors even confirm that water-related tourism experiences positively correlate with

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satisfaction and loyalty and with people's perceived quality of life (Campon-Cerro *et al.*, 2020; Anaya-Aguilar *et al.*, 2021a). For Gössling *et al.* (2012), activities practised with water have a healthy purpose, which in addition to their experiential potential due to its sensory properties (sounds, unique touch, tastes, sensations of cold or heat and colours), fulfil the goal of preserving water resources.

The scientific literature on tourism identifies two driving trends: the search for experience and the growing connection between quality of life and holidays (Campon-Cerro *et al.*, 2020). First, it is necessary to clarify the concept of experience, which is understood as the set of perceptions, feelings and thoughts experienced by the consumer when exposed to brands, products or consumption activities, as well as the memories of these experiences (Schmitt *et al.*, 2009). Secondly, it is important to explain its relationship with thermalism. Huang *et al.* (2019) show that wellness products and services have a great potential to satisfy inner needs, "feeling" good about oneself, playing a vital role in the experience and satisfaction of life. The experience acts in this case as a mediator linking autonomy to positive emotion and consequently to loyalty. In the tourism context, several authors mention that the experience can predict the consumer's intention to revisit and recommend, considering it an important theme to be further explored in the thermal sector (Han *et al.*, 2018a; Yang *et al.*, 2015; Virabhakul and Huang, 2018).

For Huang *et al.* (2019), thermal water and mineral springs, along with wellness treatments and therapies, meet customers' needs for rehabilitation and recovery from illness. Wellness-related treatments, services and activities offer tourists relaxation, stress relief and a unique experience that improves the mind, body and soul and enhances well-being (Erfurt and Cooper, 2009). Thermalism should focus on a new approach to experience tourism, structured on the potential of the health and wellness product, based on an integrated development model that makes use of digital ecosystems and smart business networks as a conceptual construction pillar (Leite *et al.*, 2021).

### *2.3 Trends and challenges for a thermal destination in times of crisis: how to communicate?*

Every day, studies on determining the factors related to the pandemic emerge in different areas of knowledge, in an attempt to find an effective treatment with the highest priority to solve this global disaster (Şahin, 2020). Regarding thermalism, this sector was also forced to re-establish itself, and although activity has been resumed, the impacts on the sector have not yet been fully calculated (Navarrete and Shaw, 2020). It is urgent to identify opportunities to reposition tourism activity given the dynamics that arise during and after a period of crisis. Despite its negative effect, the pandemic has opened new horizons for thermalism because of the health dimension that can mitigate the effects of the pandemic at least in the recovery phase. Coronavirus mainly affects the respiratory system of infected patients and thermal springs can be used in prevention or cure. In addition, the virus that produces Covid-19 does not live or reproduce in the water or mineral-medicinal that characterise thermal spas, a factor that is also relevant for the destination's safety (Navarrete and Shaw, 2020).

The development of assertive communication strategy and behavioural changes are possible strategies to deal with this pandemic and return to travel, because according to McCartney *et al.* (2021), Covid19 is here to stay. If on the one hand, Wan (2013) considers the importance of implementing government policies, on the other hand, considering the devastation and panic caused by the Covid-19 outbreak, Zheng *et al.* (2021) and Liu *et al.* (2021b) highlight the importance of adopting strategies to alleviate public fear and improve tourists' safety in a post-pandemic context. Hystad and Keller (2008) refer to media engagement as possible effective interventions to increase visitor numbers and improve a destination's economic recovery after a crisis period.

To successfully mitigate the perceived risks to health, tourists and the tourism industry, it is important to address health risk factors, through communication and distribution of information to make travellers aware of the possible risks of travelling to certain destinations (Hsieh *et al.*, 2008; Nunkoo *et al.*, 2017; Wu and Ko, 2013). Hystad and Keller (2008) conclude that effective control of communication responsibilities helps transform the initial negative media coverage into something more positive and informative; communication being an important path to follow for the recovery of any tourism destination. According to Song *et al.* (2021), a destination can be excellent, but its attractiveness can be influenced either by the lack of media coverage, or by the lack of promotion channels facilitated by technology. Digital destination communication and online sales will accelerate the tourism sector's recovery and promotion and sharing of the best experiences in social media, will improve tourists' perception.

Digital evolution and social networks continue to be, for Álvarez-Nobell *et al.* (2022), the main strategic topic in Latin America, which connect the digital society and focus on the challenges of digitalisation. In Latin America and worldwide, if on the one hand, Navarrete *et al.* (2021) mention that communication channels are also undergoing significant transformations, due to the development of new technologies, and the need to offer a renewed, modern image intensifies online campaigns on Google AdWords, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. The social media is a space for sharing personal experiences, providing more active communication environments than other sources to obtain information or ask questions related to travel (Leite *et al.*, 2021). Wechat, WhatsApp and Telegram are also starting to emerge as an important destination promotion mechanism, and it is necessary for the destination manager to focus on these tools as well. A customized promotion (e.g. no Phishing or clickbait) can help build a good relationship between thermal destination and (potential) customers, increasing the intention to visit and enjoy the thermal experience (Liu *et al.*, 2021c). On the other hand, the increasing diffusion of social media has also brought the rise of a new type of content producers, the influencers: YouTubers, tiktokers, instagrammers, bloggers and ordinary users who monetise their follower base (Hudders *et al.*, 2021). The strategic use of influencers (celebrities) for the promotion of tourism destinations gain top positions in communication strategy for their ability to influence individuals, including their purchase and revisit decisions (Pop *et al.*, 2022). Finally, Liu *et al.* (2021a) report that many tourism-related industries have developed new technologies to offer a renewed and modern image. Digital marketing, web analytics and key performance indicators play an important role in formulating a digital communication strategy, allowing permanent monitoring of actions and their constant adaptation in order to maintain organisations and destinations' competitiveness (Saura *et al.*, 2017).

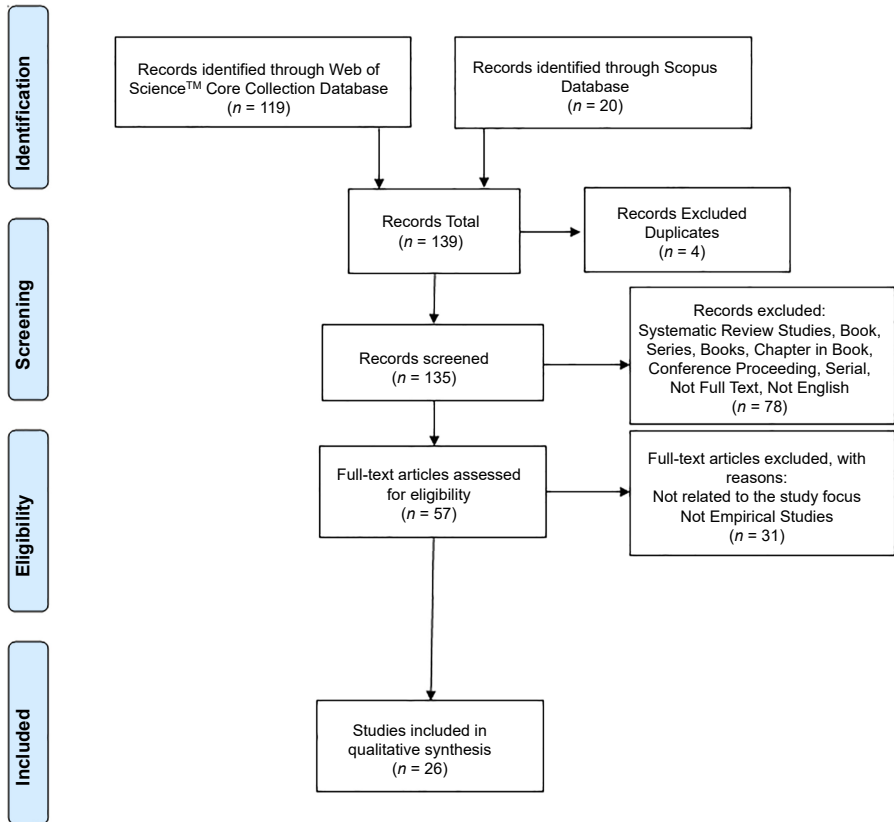
The intention is to continue to develop and improve research on the relationship between communication and tourism, in particular the thermal sector, to be able to contribute to the scientific knowledge of this important tourism sector.

### 3. Methodology

The method used is a SLR using the PRISMA Statement (Figure 1), because this is an iterative process, and performance is highly dependent on the purpose and quality of the studies included. Note that 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 distinct steps. First, as suggested by Tranfield *et al.* (2003), terms were obtained via a scoping study of the literature and discussions within the review team. 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 searching Scopus and Web of Science databases. For [Yang \(2018\)](#), these databases are among the most complete in the field of tourism research. 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, 139 articles were found. In the second stage, after careful screening, 4 duplicates were removed and based on the exclusion and eligibility criteria defined to fine-tune the review, 78 articles were excluded due to being book series, systematic review studies, book chapters, books, conference proceedings, serial, not a full text or not in English, and 31 full-text articles were excluded due to not being Empirical Studies or being unrelated to the study focus, namely for not evidencing the communication theme. 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 26 articles that were used for the qualitative analysis. EndNote 20 and Nvivo software was used to identify the articles for the study, analyse them and systematize the information collected, according to the research objective.



**Figure 1.**  
The flow diagram of the study

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

For [Yang \(2018\)](#), this type of literature scrutiny is sometimes criticised for lacking a quantitative approach and being too subjective. However, [Ferreira \(2018\)](#) and [Ferreira \*et al.\*](#)

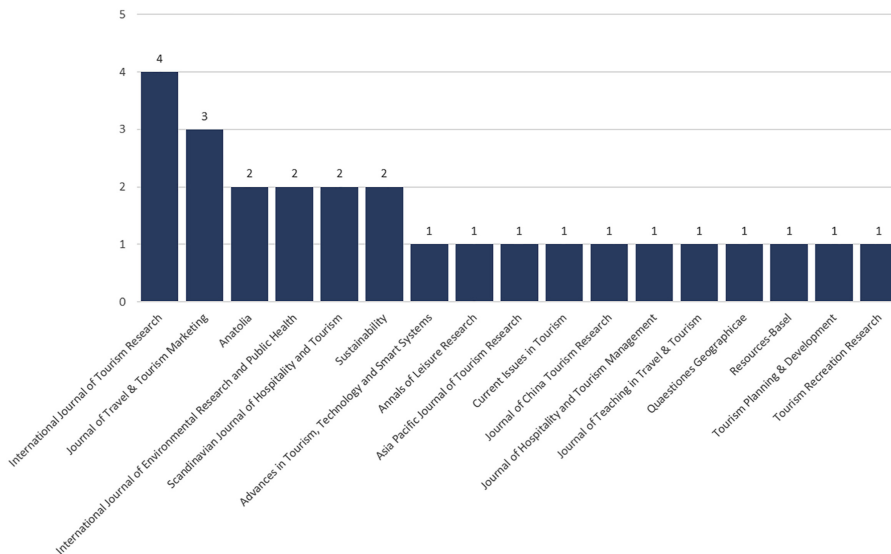
(2016) refer to the importance of this type of research, firstly by identifying relevant publications and current contributions on specific themes that can direct objective trends for future research, as is the case of communication related to thermal tourism. Secondly, it identifies researchers and can create contact networks for research, generating innovative and worldwide research opportunities.

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#### 4. Results

In this section, the results of the study and their analysis are described.

Figure 2 identifies the scientific journals where the articles analysed were published:



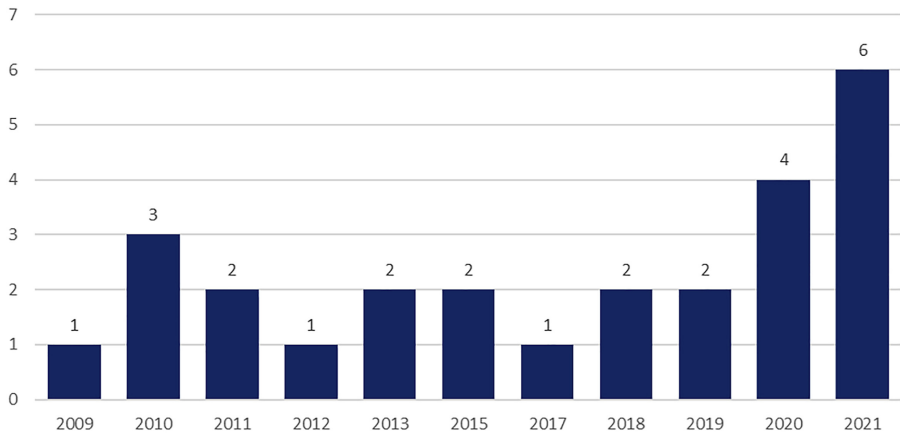
**Figure 2.**  
Identification of scientific journals

The journals with the most publications were *International Journal of Tourism Research* (RQ1) and *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* (RQ1) followed by *Anatolia* (RQ2), *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (RQ2), *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* (RQ1) and *Sustainability* (RQ2) with the same numbers of publications. Most of the articles were published in journals whose main theme is tourism, marketing and sustainability.

Research in communication applied to the thermal sector is poorly sustained and less published in journals with a high impact factor. The rise of articles in thematic journals in the areas of communication and marketing, as presented in the graph, is a reflection of the importance of the topic, especially after the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. An article published in an indexed journal has greater prominence and prestige compared to non-indexed journals.

The following figure systematises the methodology typology of the studies analysed, according to the type of study, instrument and type of analysis conducted:

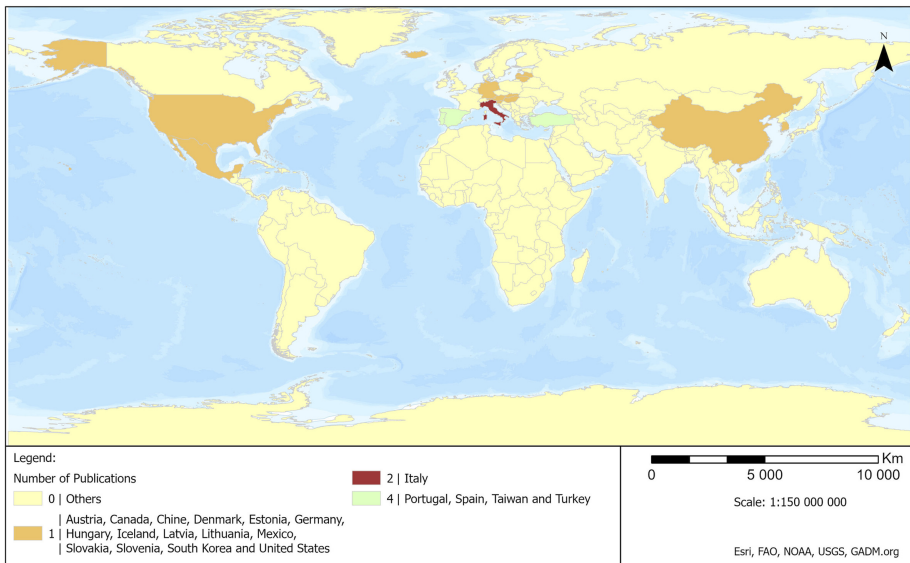
Figure 3 shows the year of publication of the articles under analysis:



**Figure 3.**  
Number of references  
by year of publication

The previous graph shows that since 2020, there has been an increase with the publication of 10 articles, reflecting the importance of this theme in scientific knowledge. [Pencarelli \(2020\)](#) mentions that the Covid-19 had negative consequences on people but it could also be a business opportunity for others. This has also favoured research, since there has been an increase in publications related to well-being in different areas of science.

[Figure 4](#) shows the countries involved in the articles analysed. The map shows that the most studied countries were Turkey, Thailand, Spain and Portugal, followed by Italy.



**Figure 4.**  
Geographical  
distribution of the  
countries under study

According to [Duman and Kozak \(2010\)](#), Turkey is placed among the top seven countries in the world in terms of hot spring sources. The results of their research indicate that hot



springs are promoted in 51 cities as part of their tourism provision. This has been noticed by researchers in the sector, which is why more and more studies are appearing in this country.

Wellness tourism has been the most popular type of holiday for tourists visiting Taiwan. In addition, the number of Thai citizens involved in this sector has increased annually, making the experience a key component of wellness tourism (Huang *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2009).

According to Joukes and Gerry (2010), Portugal has 408 mineral water springs with different therapeutic properties. Spain has been developing its thermalism. For Liberato *et al.* (2020), cooperation strategies are essential to develop a consolidated destination, with fewer resources and costs.

Mijajlovic *et al.* (2020) say that for many Western European countries, thermalism is an important factor in local and regional development; as can be seen in the map above, Hungary, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are represented.

The number of wellness tourists from regions such as Asia and Eastern Europe has grown strongly in recent years, which is why it has increasingly been the subject of scientific studies. Although thermalism in China is in its infancy, it can offer new opportunities and strengthen the overall competitiveness of China's tourism industry (Heung and Kucukusta, 2013).

Next, we present the empirical studies reviewed and show their respective focus and findings (Table 1).

As observed, Table 1 presents the main themes, a summary of the conclusions and the dimensions of communication.

If on the one hand, it is necessary to understand the *territorial development* to identify the endogenous attributes and resources of a thermal destination, on the other hand, through relationship management, central and local government as well as local private investors need to co-operate and gather synergies through *organisational communication* (Duman and Kozak, 2010; Heung and Kucukusta, 2013; Huijbens, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2009; Liberato *et al.*, 2020; Lindner *et al.*, 2021; Noviello and Smetkiewicz, 2019; Pillmayer *et al.*, 2020; Ponte *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2015).

Anaya-Aguilar *et al.* (2021c), Chrobak *et al.* (2020), Esiyok *et al.* (2017), Han *et al.* (2018b) Irimiás (2013), Kurtulmuşoğlu and Esiyok (2016) and Smith and Puczko (2015) investigate *tourist behaviour*, namely the motivations and profile of this type of tourist, such as health and spirituality, they also seek pleasure with the experience of well-being, relaxation, nature, unique environments, traditions and culture. The demands of today's tourist require a constant updating of the *skills* of the sector's professionals, with emphasis on *communication skills* in the direct relationship with the customer, to ensure their satisfaction and consequently loyalty (Emir and Saraçlı, 2011; Thal *et al.*, 2021).

The promotion of *experiences* with water causes an increase of positive emotions and satisfaction with life in the tourist (Campon-Cerro *et al.*, 2020; Chang *et al.*, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2019; Lee, 2010; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2019). For the consolidation of the brand the studies indicate the need, through *corporate communication*, to aggregate all the characteristics and explore the *digital communication* as an opportunity for the diffusion of the brand (Anaya-Aguilar *et al.*, 2021d; Joukes and Gerry, 2010).

According to the authors mentioned above and Cheng *et al.* (2013), to promote a thermal tourism destination, it is necessary to have *communication management* that promotes differentiated products, services and activities for the thermal market, essentially based on memorable experiences to build tourists' loyalty and resorting to communication strategies to make the destination known.

Study	Thematic	Findings and conclusions	Communication dimensions
<a href="#">Anaya-Aguilar <i>et al.</i> (2021b)</a> , <a href="#">Joukes and Gerry (2010)</a>	Digital Communication	These studies indicate the need to explore a set of options to diversify products, focusing on users' perspectives in combinations with the thermal spa's objectives to produce successful websites and implement two-way communication in real time. There are numerous opportunities for them to improve their communication: posting accurate and segmented information; addressing themes of current interest (environmental, sustainability and local development issues); promoting interactivity: creating discussion forums, online shopping. Everyone can benefit from the development of focused and functional websites, including spas with less visibility	Online (Digital communication)
<a href="#">Campon-Cerro <i>et al.</i> (2020)</a> , <a href="#">Rodrigues <i>et al.</i> (2019)</a> , <a href="#">Chang <i>et al.</i> (2012)</a> , <a href="#">Huang <i>et al.</i> (2019)</a> and <a href="#">Lee (2010)</a>	Tourism Experience	In the current experiential trend, tourism managers and professionals should focus on promoting experiences through differentiating products and services in order to increase positive emotion and satisfaction with life. The impact of water-based tourism activities, with a health component, as is the case of thermal tourism, can bring significant marketing results, such as satisfaction, loyalty and quality of life for individuals. They even mention that if service providers are equipped with thermal sector skills, they contribute to a better contact experience with the destination brand. They consider that listening to the murmur of water communicates emotions/thermal experiences, this being the essence of thermalism that should be considered for the purpose of creating a strong identity for thermal destinations	Corporate communication
<a href="#">Emir and Saraçlı (2011)</a> and <a href="#">Thal <i>et al.</i> (2021)</a>	Skills Management	The results of these studies suggest that competence is one of the most important factors for customer satisfaction. In the thermal tourism business, particularly the personal knowledge, experience, clothing and appearance, attitudes and behaviour of the staff who have direct communication, knowledge and interaction with the tourists play a major role in tourists' satisfaction. The communication skills are fundamental for customer relations	Communication skills
<a href="#">Duman and Kozak (2010)</a> , <a href="#">Huijbens (2011)</a> , <a href="#">Liberato <i>et al.</i> (2020)</a> , <a href="#">Pillmayer <i>et al.</i> (2020)</a> and <a href="#">Smith (2015)</a>	Territorial Development	These studies concludes that it is possible to maintain closer cooperation between public and private organisations and between cities based on the complementarity of the endogenous resources and the history of secular coexistence. In addition, dissemination enables the promotion of less known, less saturated destinations, converting the attributes of a region into a strategic political tool to strengthen destination image	Organisational communication

**Table 1.**  
Study findings and conclusions

(continued)

Study	Thematic	Findings and conclusions	Communication dimensions
		<p>Wellness images are typically oriented towards nature, outdoor experience and fun, and when combined with healthy local cuisine, local culture, clean air, nature and the essence of water we have a set of attributes to promote a thermal destination</p> <p>This view of the intersection of health and leisure opens up new opportunities for growth and development and requires an effective communication strategy</p>	
<p>Heung and Kucukusta (2013), Lee <i>et al.</i> (2009), Lindner <i>et al.</i> (2021), Noviello and Smetkiewicz (2019) and Ponte <i>et al.</i> (2020)</p>	<p>Territorial Development</p>	<p>These studies analyse strategic planning in tourism through dimensions of destination attractiveness and examine their impact on the thermal sector. On the one hand, to identify gaps in supply, as well as opportunities for future development, such as: high social awareness of the exploitation of geothermal potential, long-term vision, implementation of sustainable development principles and local policies based on long-term plans, innovations, actions activating local and regional communities, improving entrepreneurship, attracting investors and external resources. On the other hand, they present a promising co-creation model active, healthy with similar characteristics and assets. Effective communication assists management in maintaining good relations with workers, customers, suppliers, stakeholders, government and the community at large. Media advertising, government support and the organisation of new regional events to be the most effective</p>	<p>Communication management</p>
<p>Chrobak <i>et al.</i> (2020), Irimiás (2013), Kurtulmuşoğlu and Esiyok (2016) and Smith and Puczkó (2015)</p>	<p>Tourist Behaviour</p>	<p>The authors seek to provide an overview of the current profile of the health and wellness tourist, mainly because of the paradigm shift: the concept of “lifelong wellness” which is likely to remain forever. In terms of traditions and trends, it was observed that tourists in this sector are interested in ancient traditions and rituals, natural resources and exclusive therapies and treatments that reflect the location. They should organise promotional campaigns that integrate these perspectives to promote the spa destination brand</p>	<p>Corporate communication</p>
<p>Anaya-Aguilar <i>et al.</i> (2021a), Esiyok <i>et al.</i> (2017), Han <i>et al.</i> (2018a) and Han <i>et al.</i> (2018b)</p>	<p>Tourist Behaviour</p>	<p>These studies provide information about tourists’ motivations: interests and expectations in terms of factors related to health and well-being. Active people, people of retirement age and the elderly have different behavioural patterns, which result in fluctuating lengths of stay. Segmented marketing policies and strategies with an emphasis on health and wellness for general tourists, exhibitions and events, such as: guided tours, experience programmes, thematic exhibitions and open sessions for different visitor groups with a wide range of health and wellness related interests is necessary</p>	<p>Communication management</p>

Table 1.

## 5. Discussion, conclusions and implications

### 5.1 Discussion

This analysis intends to outline the research trends of the theme studied and address the main challenges faced by thermalism nowadays. Similarly to [Buxton and Michopoulou \(2021\)](#), who state that the thermal sector remains largely unexplored, this research also aims to progress towards better understanding of thermalism.

The first discussion concerns the ambiguity of terms related to thermalism, which can create confusion in consumers' minds. Authors can use different expressions for the same concepts, for example [Alina-Cerasela \(2015\)](#) uses "thermalism"; "spa tourism"; "thermal and mineral water"; "thermal water", while [Jahić and Selimović \(2015\)](#) resort to "spa tourism"; "thermal mineral water"; "thermal mineral springs"; "thermal water" and "thermal springs". The aim is not to create an academic division, but rather to contribute to better conceptual understanding, from a theoretical and paradigmatic perspective, of what thermalism is. Following [Alina-Cerasela \(2015\)](#), [Hall \(2011\)](#) and [Jahić and Selimović \(2015\)](#), and on the basis of SLR we propose the following definition: Thermalism is the preservation of health and well-being, through natural mineral water, and the exploitation of territories' endogenous resources. From this perspective, and after intensive research and analysis of previous studies, we propose the use of the terms "thermalist" for the tourist and "thermalism" for the type of tourism whose essence is thermal water.

One of the main contributions of this article lies in the proposed conceptual model, presented in the [Figure 5](#), as a result of analysing the scientific articles in the SLR, as well as complementary, updated research and in-depth reading on communication:



**Figure 5.**  
Conceptual model

**Source(s):** Elaborated by the authors

We propose the Corporate, Organisational, Skills, Management and Online (COSMO) model, considering the convergent effect of the five dimensions of communication obtained through the SLR. The challenge was to inter-relate the dimensions with the main themes (Tourism Experience, Territorial Development, Skills Management, Tourist Behaviour and Digital Communication) to communicate thermalism.

According to the SLR, thermalism is a product of excellence that contributes to regional development and is consequently a driving force for proper functioning of the engine that promotes tourism in the world. This engine needs to identify several forces to converge and communicate what thermalism is:

*Tourist Behaviour* – The motivations and new priorities and demands of tourists' (Smith and Puczkó, 2015; Anaya-Aguilar *et al.*, 2021c; Chrobak *et al.*, 2020; Esiyok *et al.*, 2017; Han *et al.*, 2018b; Irimiás, 2013; Kurtulmuşoğlu and Esiyok, 2016), looking for memorable experiences with thermal water.

*Tourism Experience* – Natural hot springs are unique, rare and irreplaceable assets that have already been shown to have significant economic value. Their unique attributes should be branded and promoted with innovation in order to broaden and enrich the experience of visitors to hot springs to respond to this new and emerging market opportunity. Exclusive treatments and services are essential elements in creating brand experiences and customer loyalty (Campon-Cerro *et al.*, 2020; Chang *et al.*, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2019; Lee, 2010; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2019).

*Corporate* – The keywords of corporate communication are stakeholder relations and integration, that is, the coordination of all formal communication activities, including internal and external communication, marketing and public relations (Frandsen and Johansen, 2018). The creation of a strong identity for countries with a thermal destination image, with a view to strengthening the attractiveness of a destination, must be accompanied by a study on tourist behaviour and understand the relationship with the thermal experience, as well as by appropriate territorial planning (Papageorgiou and Beriatos, 2011; Chang *et al.*, 2012; Chrobak *et al.*, 2020; Huang *et al.*, 2019; Lee, 2010; Smith and Puczkó, 2015). They should for this purpose identify attractive communication messages for the development of communication strategies adapted to each territory, culminating in the creation of a thermal destination brand (Cheng *et al.*, 2013; Liu *et al.*, 2014, 2017).

*Territorial Development* – Noviello and Smętkiewicz (2019) share the opinion and reinforce the high social awareness regarding exploitation of the geothermal potential, a vision based on the implementation of sustainable development. Local principles and policies, innovations, actions with local and regional communities, improving entrepreneurship, attracting investors, exploiting destination attributes and external resources are key initiatives for thermal destinations (Duman and Kozak, 2010; Heung and Kucukusta, 2013; Huijbens, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2009; Liberato *et al.*, 2020; Pillmayer *et al.*, 2020; Ponte *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2015).

*Organisational* – In addition to informing, communication makes it possible to build relationships. This strategy should be a priority of local and central government and also of local private investors. The opportunities arising from the Covid-19 pandemic (Anaya-Aguilar *et al.*, 2021d; Navarrete and Shaw, 2020); the advantages of thermal territories, through managing relationships with neighbouring destinations with similar characteristics Garzon and Bajana (2016), Liberato *et al.* (2020) and Smith (2015) related to the exploitation of their endogenous resources (gastronomy, culture, nature, among others) are considerations for an organisational communication strategy.

*Skills Management* – This paradigm shift is based on different characteristics, with the acquisition of skills by professionals in the sector being a priority (Thal *et al.*, 2021). Everyone should know how to communicate about thermalism, from the top manager to the operational manager, e.g. water characteristics, benefits and other relevant information.

*Communication Skills* – Emir and Saraçlı (2011) and Thal *et al.* (2021) mention employee skills as a key factor. Communication skills, written and oral were highlighted and should be prioritised. Knowing how to communicate with customers builds loyalty and increases tourists' satisfaction.

*Management* – These characteristics call for communication management and mean governments and destination managers must acquire new skills, in order to produce increasingly attractive destinations (Emir and Saraçlı, 2011; Heung and Kucukusta, 2013;

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Kurtuluşoğlu and Esiyok, 2016; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2019; Thal *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, Alvarez-Nobell *et al.* (2022) consider that a communication department in an organisation has a dual role, influencing at an internal level and impacting on the external results of the activities promoted. The advantage of communication management, monitoring content and evaluating the impact of information is that it allows for a clear vision of the sector and the most appropriate means to reach the public, including identifying the biggest challenges and opportunities for the sector, promoting destinations in a logic of continuous improvement and visibility, which is the way forward.

*Digital Communication – Where do tourists consult information when choosing a travel destination? What are the appropriate communication channels to reach the thermal market?* These are some supporting questions that provide the basis for future research in the area of communication. Social networks and websites, emerges as facilitating, bidirectional, effective and capable of promoting behavioural change in the health and wellness tourism sector (Leite *et al.*, 2021). Based on the era in which we live and considering the digital distribution channel, the media selected and the effectiveness of communication messages (Anaya-Aguilar *et al.*, 2021d; Joukes and Gerry, 2010) are some of the factors to be considered in developing a digital communication plan for thermal destinations. Considering Covid-19, it is necessary to make known the opportunities that this sector offers, focusing on customised communication (Liu *et al.*, 2014, 2017), treatment, prevention and well-being, ensuring the safety of this type of tourism with attractive messages (Navarrete and Shaw, 2020). Consumer trust in influencers can increase the desire to visit a destination; companies should pay more attention to this communication strategy, enhancing the perception of visiting a destination, which may increase the awareness of the thermal destination brand (Pop *et al.*, 2022). Image building, effective communication messages and destination-specific videos are some examples that could be implemented with positive results.

*Online – Heung and Kucukusta (2013) identify the most effective methods to promote health and wellness tourism, such as advertising in social media, government support and organising new regional events. Anaya-Aguilar *et al.* (2021d) and Joukes and Gerry (2010) mention websites with well-structured, updated information that should be bidirectional in real time. For Liu *et al.* (2021d), 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. Communication remains a crucial component of crisis management. Liu *et al.* (2021b) note that official media responses and other emergency information to an anxious public, notably through Twitter, can be an important part of crisis management and public support.*

This model supports a plurality of communication strategies, with different characteristics and objectives but which meet a collective purpose: to disseminate information about thermalism, in order to build collective knowledge to promote thermal destinations. These factors, if balanced and structured, are the basis to agglutinate the thermal tourism destination brand of a territory, a country and even a continent. When thermal excellence involves the view of tourists, tourism professionals, local and central government and communication professionals, we have the formula to promote a thermal destination brand with efficiency. Ultimately, fulfilling all the research possibilities suggested here, it is considered that communication can contribute to make people aware of what thermalism is and to promoting future trends of a thermal destination. The diversity and originality of this research model will be useful for destination promoters, thermal managers and communication professionals.

## 5.2 Conclusions

Among other results, this in-depth analysis of scientific publications focused on the year of publication, the country studied, journals publishing and the main dimensions underlying

thermalism shown. There was found to be greater interest in thermalism and publications are in journals with a high impact factor, which can motivate other researchers to conduct further empirical studies on communication in thermalism. Despite the presence of countries from other continents, Central Europe is prominent because thermalism has always been an important part of the European tourist offer and it has developed significantly in the last decades. Therefore, to consolidate growth, sustain the economy and simultaneously reinforce concerns about the dimension of health and well-being, it is necessary to transfer knowledge and valorise existing resources, with academic research having a fundamental role. Turkey and Thailand have also been prominent in this sector and many studies have analysed how to attract new audiences.

The problem of the ambiguity of the term “spa tourism” (Smith and Puczko (2015) was identified. For Mijajlovic *et al.* (2020), “thermalism” is an authentic term and cannot be confused with other types of wellness tourism. Association with the term “spa” can create a conflict in the minds of some consumers and researchers, this being a critical factor to consider in defining a brand to develop a thermal tourism destination, and so it is important to clarify it. The creation of a brand is important not only for thermalism but also for customer loyalty in any sector of activity. The more the customer identifies with the product, service or destination, the more likely they are to revisit it. Liu *et al.* (2014) and Liu *et al.* (2017) concluded that the hotel industry should personalise the brand experience to satisfy customers, stimulating loyalty towards the hotel brand. To motivate repeat guests, the authors mentioned that Banyan Tree Macau embroiders guests’ names on bathrobes and places them inside the room wardrobe before arrival. Brand awareness has a direct effect on brand attitude, but not on purchase intention. From this perspective, increasing customers’ brand awareness and enhancing their perception of the brand’s market performance can indirectly increase customers’ purchase intentions. We share the same view as Cheng *et al.* (2013) that customised marketing efforts and communication management initiatives may not only attract (current and potential) tourists, but also help to attract a memorable thermal experience that is unique and cannot be imitated in other destinations.

Regarding the question *Is the definition of thermalism consensual among all researchers?* We can say yes, definitions are easy to find, and they all contain similar variables and their purpose and meaning do not vary much (Erfurt and Cooper, 2009). However, it is also true that there is an ambiguity of terms, and it is necessary to clarify what thermalism is, which is why we present a conceptual reflection and propose a definition.

When analysing the second question *What are the underlying dimensions of communication highlighted in scientific publications?* We consider that the relationship between communication and thermalism is still a very incipient area of scientific knowledge, which identifies the gap and is one of the contributions of this article. A finding that cuts across other sectors, Pérez *et al.* (2019), e.g. found that some aspects of the content of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) message are more closely linked to cognitive issues (e.g. CSR impact, fit or motives), while other variables relate to affective aspects (e.g. importance of the issue and CSR commitment). Thus, the importance of the communication issue represents an affective evaluation that is more meaningful for people when evaluating the CSR message of a restaurant chain than of a banking company. In this sense, we also conclude that research on communication deserves more discussion in the future. *Understanding how to maximise commercial return through communication? Know how to identify what to communicate? How to communicate? Why communicate? Where to communicate?* These are fundamental strategies for a more effective and personalised communication in thermalism. However, through the central themes of the publications analysed, we identify five dimensions of communication and indirectly digital communication is seen as an essential tool to communicate and make the tourist loyal to the destination. A conceptual model of the interaction between the main themes identified and five

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dimensions of communication was developed. The results provide theoretical contributions for correct and effective action for the promotion and communication of thermalism.

Answering the question *What are the big issues for the communication of a thermal tourism destination in pandemic times?* The literature review in this article aims to analyse a new conceptual design specifically for communication in the thermal sector. Although this publication does not provide general empirical strategies to overcome the current Covid-19 crisis, it illustrates how the dimensions of communication, through strategic management, help identify the strengths of thermalism and shape the identity of a destination in a constantly changing contextual environment. *How?* Through communication. The major challenges for communication, given the current situation of the on-going Covid-19 pandemic, with travel restrictions severely affecting the tourism sector, mean that innovation and digital transformation are now more important than ever (Lindner *et al.*, 2021). Besides making processes more agile and efficient, the digital age speeds up the spread of information, virtually in real time, social networks, websites, chatbots, booking, payments, shopping, all online, just by having an active Internet connection (Saura *et al.*, 2017). Finally, consumer trust in influencers can increase the desire to visit a destination and experience thermalism (Pop *et al.*, 2022). It is urgent to create communication departments in organisations, to train professionals in the sector with digital communication skills, raise awareness of cooperation through relationship management, create innovative products and services that satisfy, with memorable experiences through water, the needs of thermal goers and consolidate thermal destination brands based on endogenous resources and history. 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). These dimensions of communication provide through technology the automation of information; improve the efficiency of communication and enable better results, increasing the visibility of thermal destinations. Other crises will arise and continue to test the world, including tourism destinations and vision and proactivity are needed. With the learning from the Covid-19 experience and through new technologies, it is necessary to monitor and align strategies for destinations to be more efficient in the future.

### 5.3 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature by providing a theoretical framework of excellence in thermalism. One possible way to solve the ambiguity of terms related to thermalism is to consider another more comprehensive term as a combination of different approaches. The aim is not to create an academic division, but rather to contribute to better conceptual understanding, from a theoretical and paradigmatic perspective, of what thermalism is. Here, a new targeted and more comprehensive concept emerges, which from the academic perspective of communication sciences will lead to prevention for a new way of feeling good with life, contributing to promoting thermal destinations in the world with a greater understanding.

### 5.4 Practical implications

Research in tourism destination management has provided solutions, through communication, to problems that are faced daily by countries and we hope this research also contributes to the recovery of thermal tourism destinations in times of crisis. It is also from this perspective that based on the main themes and dimensions of communication identified in the SLR that we propose the COSMO model to help promote resilient thermal destinations prepared for future crises. The diversity and originality of this research model will be useful for destination promoters, spa managers and communication professionals.



### 5.5 Limitations and future research

Our research addresses the current scarcity of academic work on the importance of communication applied to a thermal destination and the lack of relevant strategic models for the promotion of a destination. Finally, a limitation was the fact that only two databases were considered and only journal articles were included.

As a future line of research, we propose extending the theme to thermal tourism experiences. In addition, scientific studies focusing on water-based experiences connected with thermalism are almost non-existent and very relevant for the future of the sector, as well as studies in the area of communication with the following research questions *where do tourists consult information when choosing a travel destination? What are the appropriate communication channels to reach the thermal market?*

We close this reflection by concluding that the thermal tradition, through the know-how of the medical class, the properties of thermal waters and the cultural history associated with its early days, stimulated more recently by implementing innovations, will regain its role in preserving health and well-being through thermal water and the exploitation of territories' endogenous resources. These factors are the basis through which communication sciences can create strategies adapted to each country to promote a thermal destination brand.

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