

## **Decisions to choose thermal spas in Portugal: A study on sociodemographic determinants, pull-push motivations and sustainability**

**CRISTINA SILVA ARAÚJO<sup>1</sup>, ALCINA NUNES<sup>2</sup> & JOÃO PINTO BARBOSA<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>University of Aveiro, <sup>2</sup>UNIAG, Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, <sup>3</sup>Associação das Termas de Portugal  
Contacting author: scristina@ua.pt

**Keywords** | Health and wellness tourism, Thermal spa, Pull-push motivations, Sustainability

**Objectives** | Health and wellness tourism has gained popularity due to changing attitudes and behaviours towards health. In this context, thermal spaces are positioned as attractive to a market eager not only for therapeutic solutions but also for leisure/leisure proposals with the added value provided by the properties of natural mineral waters. Both needs shape tourist demand, the first being more focused on Health Tourism and the second more on Wellbeing Tourism. The latter, Thermal Spa Tourism or Wellness Thermalism, is proving to be a promising market. However, there is still little investigation into the identity of tourists and how current trends, such as the sustainability attribute, may influence the selection of these spaces. This attribute becomes crucial in light of consumers' growing concern with socio-environmental issues (Euromonitor Internacional, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to consider whether visitors to thermal spas are influenced by this concern when making decisions. Given the increasing importance of sustainability in the tourism industry and the lack of knowledge about the unique qualities of the thermal market (Vaz, Alves, Ferreira, Costa, Rodrigues, Fernandes & Nunes, 2022), this investigation seeks: i. identify the specific tourists' motivations (push factors) for practising thermal spa tourism; ii. The primary services and treatments used; iii. The dimensions and attributes considered most relevant for the selection of thermal spas (pull factors), including iv. Factors related to sustainability given the importance of this topic for tourism and society in general. Finally, the aim is to understand the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics – gender, age and income – and push factors.

**Methodology** | An initial survey was conducted on tourists aged 18 to 65 who visited spas for well-being. After the pretest, the questionnaire was revised into six parts: screening questions, push motivation, pull and sustainability attributes, services/treatments used in the thermal space spa, travel characteristics, and sociodemographic characteristics. Data was collected through an online survey distributed via Google and shared on social media by Termas de Portugal and the Escola de Turismo de Portugal in Porto. To date, a total of 67 valid surveys have been collected. The data

were processed using descriptive statistics with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program (version 20.0).

**Main Results and Contributions** | | Based on this preliminary study, regarding push motivation, the data shows that relaxation is the most important motivator for this group, followed by the pursuit of holistic well-being. The most sought-after treatments/services are mainly associated with natural mineral waters, namely Sauna and Turkish bath (65.7%), Dynamic thermal pool (64.2%), Vichy shower (52.2%) and Hydrotherapy services (49.3%). Regarding the pull attributes, the study results indicate that therapists are the most influential factor in decision-making. Factors such as hygiene, courtesy, and knowledge of products and services are crucial. Additionally, the environment plays a significant role in decision-making, including temperature, ventilation, privacy, and tranquillity. Finally, pricing also plays a vital role in decision-making. Sustainability is often not a top priority, but it should be considered. This is especially true for younger people and those between the ages of 46 and 55, as well as women and those with higher incomes.

Regarding theoretical contributions, we aim to bridge the gap in understanding what motivates tourists to seek spas specifically for well-being. This theoretical body also aims to deepen understanding of how emerging consumer trends, such as sustainability, may influence the preferences and decision-making of tourism actors. This data is crucial to understanding people's decision-making when choosing this spa type (Kucukusta, Pang, & Chui, 2013). Since offering tourism products that provide valuable experiences is crucial (Singh, Manhas, Mir, & Quintela, 2022), this information is vital for optimizing the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing activities (Brandão, Liberato, Teixeira, & Liberato, 2021; Quintela, Costa, & Correia, 2021). Doing so will better satisfy the target markets (Kucukusta et al., 2013). Therefore, this data plays a crucial role in enabling spa managers to redefine their priorities, segment their services more effectively, and redirect their offers to meet the needs and expectations of their clients.

**Limitations** | Caution should be exercised when interpreting the data presented in the empirical study due to the small sample size. This fact made it impossible to study specific inferential analysis tests, making it impossible to extrapolate to the target population. As such, the conclusions of this analysis only apply to the specific population being studied.

**Conclusions** | The study is a significant step towards comprehending the characteristics of wellness tourists who opt for thermal spa. The aim is to begin an investigation that details the pull-push motivations, the most appreciated services and treatments, and the relationship between sustainability and decision-making when choosing a thermal spa. Despite having to be read carefully, the data highlights the significant impact of sociodemographic factors on decision-making in this particular population. For example, women, young people and those with a higher income

level are more likely to give greater importance to sustainability. The most desired services and treatments are typically related to natural mineral waters. According to preliminary data, the primary reason for utilizing these services is relaxation (push motivations), as noted in other studies. The relevance of the excellent characteristics of human resources in thermal spas is considered at the level of pull attributes. This fact may reveal the spa industry's potential to benefit from investment in training to improve the quality of human resources. However, all this data will be explored further by analysing a more relevant sample to understand better the market for one of the increasingly popular tourist products - Thermal Spa Tourism.

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