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XV International Tourism Congress
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*The Image and Sustainability of
Tourism Destinations*

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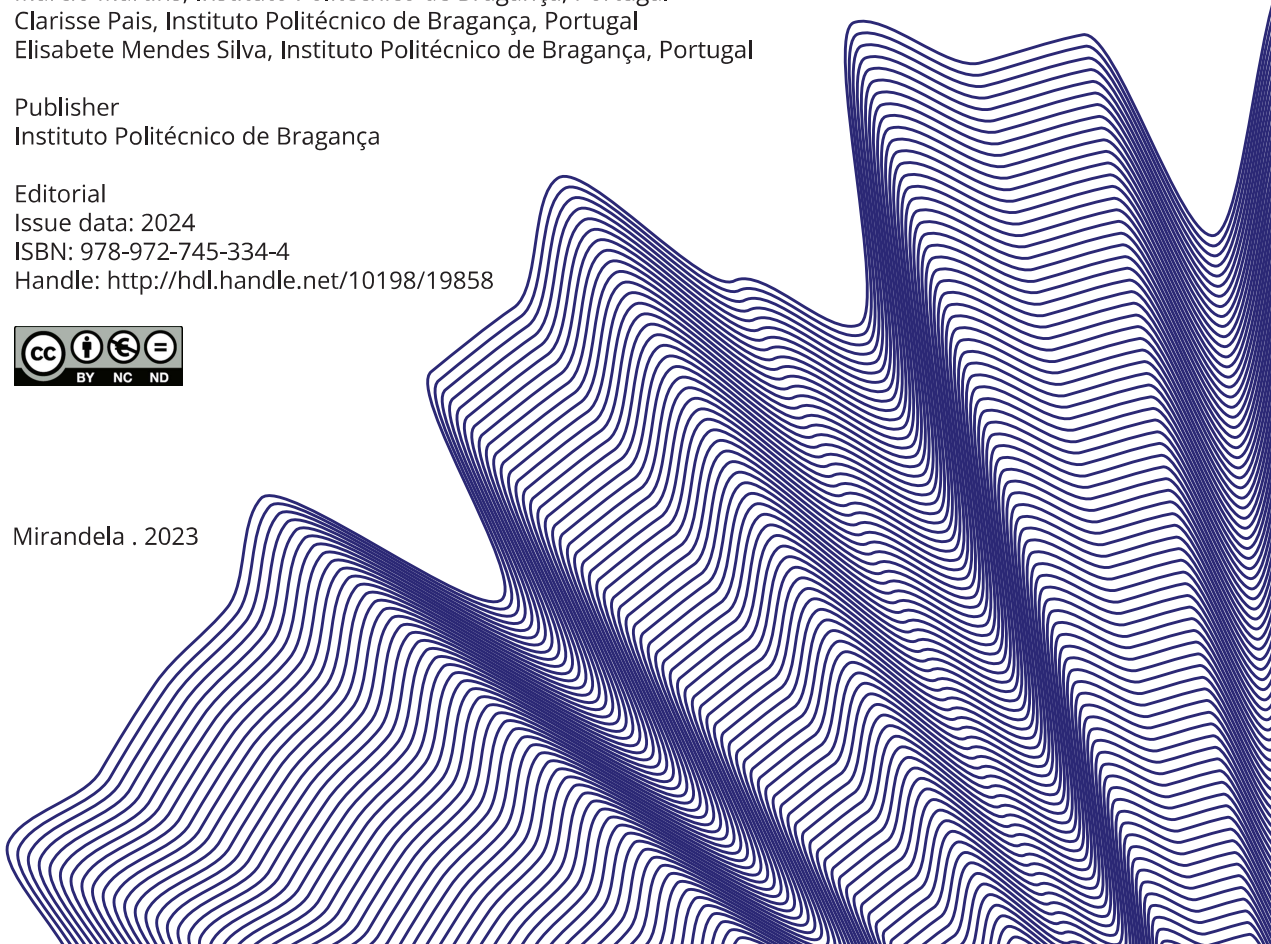
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PERCEPTION OF THE IMAGE OF THERMAL SPAS IN PORTUGAL

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Purpose – The image of destinations is of great importance in the process of developing tourism for a location, acting not only as a way of differentiating itself from its potential competitors, but, mainly, as an attempt to provide economic support for the sustainable development of the destination (Chagas, 2009). The spa sector in Portugal assumes a growing importance in regions with low population density, where most of the resorts are located, as it is sometimes the main employer in the region (Hofer, et al. 2012; Costa & Antunes, 2022). Thus, the main objective of this study is to evaluate the determinants of the image of a thermal destination in Portugal, in order to improve or (re)position the image of the destination efficiently.

Theoretical framework – Given the great competition between destinations, it is crucial to understand the image and image formation of a tourist destination (Hallmann et al., 2015). Thus, to build the image of a spa resort, it is necessary to know what spa customers are looking for and what their expectations are so that managers adjust services to customer preferences (Navarrete & Shaw, 2021; Ramos et al., 2021). On the other hand, improving infrastructure and promoting activities related to thermal tourism are also crucial for the development of this sector's image (Barbosa et al., 2020).

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology used was based on a literature review on the image of destinations and on health and wellness tourism. An analysis of secondary data was carried out and an online survey was used, applied through social networks, in April 2023, obtaining 181 responses.

Findings – The results indicate that only 38.8% of respondents have already attended a spa and that 61.3% did so for well-being reasons, while 38.7% went for treatments.

Ten items related to the spa image were presented on a scale from 1 – not at all important to 5 – very important. An exploratory factor analysis was carried out, finding three factors, in order of importance: Factor 1 – Health benefits (Eigen value of 2.451), Factor 2 – Engaging with nature (Eigen value of 2.024) and Factor 3 – Spas frequented by the elderly (Eigen value of 1.802). These factors explain 62.7% of the total variance.

Research, practical & social implications – Based on the study carried out, the managers of thermal organizations will be able to adjust their products to the real needs of potential customers, improving or repositioning the image that exists about thermal spa in Portugal.

Originality/value – The image of a destination has been widely studied, but still little studied in spas in Portugal, which does not happen in other countries. Thus, it is an opportunity to compare results with other studies and validate certain assumptions.

Keywords – Tourism, Image, Health and wellness tourism, Thermal spas.

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