

Encouraging innovation and relational trends in thermal tourism: a Peninsular Northwest perspective

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Abstract

The innovation process, and its application to tourism, has been gradually gaining ground in the academic community as a field of study. Similarly, in recent decades, tourism has received greater attention from researchers in several sciences. The present manuscript intends to gather and sistematize the main aspects related to innovation process in specific tourism context, in particular the case of thermal tourism in Peninsular Northwest. In specific, in this region, thermal tourism still constitutes a vector of sustainable development, serving as leverage for complementary activities like healthcare and thermal tourism. The study has as purpose to provide a better understanding regarding the essence of innovation process and entrepreneurship: theoretical and practical implications. With a theoretical perspective, the manuscript aims to bring together the major components of entrepreneurship and its implications tourist perspective and relationship marketing (i.e. consumer perspective). In the end, we intend to explore the relationship with thermal tourism consumers, suggesting a conceptual model (to be tested empirically) that relates relational marketing and the result of innovation in tourism (favoring trust, commitment, quality of service, satisfaction and loyalty). A future study should include emotional factors. The new vogue of thermal tourism forces us to challenge and re-visit the power relationships that exist within contemporary tourism and the host-guest relationship.

Keywords: Innovation, Process creation, Thermal tourism.

Introduction

Tourism is an economic and social phenomenon due to its ability to create regional and cross-border development. According to Ratten et al. (2019), there has been increasing recognition of the way tourism can be innovative, particularly through creative means (e.g. thermal tourism). This is evident in new services developed that integrate technology and sustainability practices. The subject of interest for many years, the role of innovation in tourism is growing in significance. There are two main reasons for the dramatic growth. Firstly, the tourism industry has been the launchpad for new technological innovations that have created new markets and segments (e.g. thermal tourism), and secondly, the tourism industry has a large number of small-sized enterprises include tourism providers such as hotels, travel agencies or educational providers (Ratten et al., 2019). Therefore, and according to Ma and Tan (2006, p.705), “there has been an increasingly popular trend of cross-fertilization among strategic management

research and entrepreneurship research, two fields deeply concerned with wealth creation and heavily influenced by Schumpeter's seminal work on innovation and creative destruction". With regard to its proximity to the concept of innovation, Schumpeter (1934) argues that innovation can be seen as a phenomenon, including technical, non-technical aspects as well as innovations in product and process innovations (e.g. tourism industry). The creation process contributes to business success and increased competitive advantage, which is a theme that has clearly captured the attention of researchers in the field of management. The dynamic nature of this process, coupled with the constant need to invest in a highly distinctive and differentiating offering new studies have provided in order to score market position and achieve consumer satisfaction, including the level of emerging realities confirmed by new trends and desires (Costa, 2001; Buhalis & Costa, 2006). Innovation is the adoption of a change that results in something new to the organization and relevance to the environment, and the creative idea and its development is the seed germinated by innovative, effective for the market economy (Sousa & Alves, 2019). There is a large body of knowledge about innovation management but less is known from a specific thermal perspective. This is unusual as thermal management has an abundance of innovation due to its emphasis on technology and change. In this sense, innovation has attracted the attention of several scholars and entrepreneurs together with this research topic (Ratten, 2016). The present manuscript intends to contribute theoretically to the management of innovation in specific tourism contexts (i.e. thermal tourism) in Peninsular Northwest. In the end, we intend to explore the relationship with thermal tourism consumers, suggesting a conceptual model (to be tested empirically) that relates relational marketing and the result of innovation in tourism (favoring trust, commitment, quality of service, satisfaction and loyalty). The model should be tested empirically in the Peninsular Northwest. This makes it possible to open new doors and open new markets, enabling greater efficiency in business, economic growth and new ways of targeting an increasingly competitive market, in specific the case of thermal tourism contexts in Peninsular Northwest.

Innovation and relational trends

Innovation can be seen as a specific tool of entrepreneurs, the means with which exploit change as an opportunity for a different business or service, being able to be understood and, as such, to be practiced, leading to a common distinction between invention and innovation (Drucker, 1993). Almost all the innovations reflect existing knowledge, combined with new uses, suffering the concept of innovation as a shift towards emphasis on the interaction between institutions, focus on interactive for the creation, dissemination and sharing of knowledge and relevance of the role of government processes as an important actor in an innovative environment (Sousa, 2015). It is important to clarify the difference between two concepts that, for different times, tend to be confused: Process Innovation and the Innovation Process. Innovation Process is essentially related to the set of steps that tend to incorporate both the market and technology. Companies have the ability to go seizing, building your knowledge base and thus make the continuous improvement of process management (Tidd, Bessant & Pavitt, 2003). Monitor the internal and external environment and analyze the relevant signals will be the starting point. After this, we have the decision about how to respond. Finally, we will implement the project with the development of technology and the domestic and foreign market (Sousa, 2015). The Process Innovation, by the way, combines the adoption of a process view of the organization's business with the application of innovation to key processes. This is the big difference, compared with the Innovation Process, but it allows us to understand its complexity. Process Innovation encompasses the prediction of new work strategies, the actual process activity and the implementation of change in their complex human, technological and organizational dimensions (Davenport, 1993). According to Davenport (1993), in practice, companies need to combine the two concepts in a continuous quality program. Ideally, the organization will seek to stabilize the process and start continuous improvement, to later create the ambition to go on the innovation processes. The differences between these two concepts can hinder your combination, so one of the possibilities to minimize this problem may be the assignment of different roles to different managers, with high levels of cooperation. The company must be aware that the risk of innovation processes is at least proportional to the

rewards for that in reduced competitiveness continuous improvements environments may be the preferred choice. Highly competitive environments (e.g. greater balance between enterprises, reduced rate of market growth, high barriers to exit) may encourage the bet on a change with the greatest impact (process innovation). Access to information (e.g. technological innovations) and the challenge of the information revolution is also the base of the reach of competitive advantage, in order to maximize innovation in the process and, consequently, greater differentiation from competitors (Ratten, 2015).

The dynamic nature of triggering and entrepreneurial process

Entrepreneurial activity is seen as a process: includes a set of steps, is subject to tourism management, continuous and applicable in many contexts (Stevenson & Jarillo 1990). This process becomes a source of competitive advantage on a global scale. This entrepreneurial process is, as a rule, inextricably linked to certain factors that allow initial "take the leap" (circumstances, triggering events). Shindehutte et al. (2000) present a conceptual model that summarizes the dynamic nature of the triggering process in an attempt to summarize the various contributions on this topic.

The entrepreneurial process is conceptualized as a response to the awakening of the event. However, the nature of the trigger, relevance and impact depends on the dynamic interaction between the characteristics of managers/employees (e.g. personal life), firm characteristics (e.g. size, culture) and external developments of the environment (e.g. competitiveness). The different types of entrepreneurial activities are probably the result of different types of triggers.

Shindehutte et al. (2000) present a summary that reflect the main differences between conventional marketing and entrepreneurial marketing. The entrepreneurial process results in corporate contexts, rather than individual traits of an increasingly conscious need to provide the organization with innovative behavior and can, according to Sharma and Chrisman (1999), take many forms. The prospect of Schollhammer (1982) is the most cited and identifies five types of corporate entrepreneurship: administrative, opportunistic, acquisitive; incubative; imitative. Traditionally, innovation management and entrepreneurship tend to be excluded from the domain of conventional marketing department (Shindehutte et al, 2000).

The creation process in thermal Tourism context

Tourism is a phenomenon that moves millions of people around the world, taking as a major driver of the global economy. Every year, much due to the frequent changes in the tourism environment, fosters competition between and within tourist destinations (Bigné & Andreu, 2004; Sousa & Rocha, 2019; Sousa, Silva & Malheiro, 2020). Moreover, tourism is a sector of great importance to the economy, responsible for creating a large number of jobs. For instance, female entrepreneurship in the tourism sector has been rather neglected as a field of study and women's employment opportunities and the segregation of occupations are the major focus of research on women's situation in the tourism context (Tajeddini, Ratten & Denisa, 2017). As a psychological phenomenon, a tourist trip is preceded by a specific need that generates a reason to travel and sets a goal for the trip, which follows the search for information (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Sousa & Alves, 2019). Like other emerging sectors in a modern economy, tourism is a dynamic and ever-changing industry (e.g. Wellness and thermal tourism). As such, comes an increasing need to understand the consumer behavior of thermal destinations contexts. According to Lordkipanidze et al (2005), the growth of the tourism sector and increasing demand with regard to new types of tourism, makes it even more visible and required its connection with the emerging trends in entrepreneurship (e.g. Termalism, Thalassotherapy, Spas and quality of life, Senior Thermalism). Since tourism is composed of many of small firms, they are constantly called upon to respond quickly to new trends and market demands (assuming as a source of innovation). The role of each actor in the distribution channel, within the operational management of tourism, will be critical to appreciate the range and nature of the emerging changes. The use of technology has profound implications to satisfy tourist demand

as it enables the interconnection between consumers, intermediaries and producers, providing at the same time, tools for strategic marketing development (Buhalis, 2003; Kim, Lee & Hiemstra, 2004).

According Costa, Quintela and Mendes (2015) Wellness and thermal tourism has become an emerging market segment directed not only for those who pursue solely thermal treatments but also for those seeking illness prevention, physical improvement and spiritual balance or even for those eager of cultural and relaxation programs. In this sense, this specific niche tourism has become more complex and creative, demanding high quality equipment and infrastructures, providing a wide range of products and services related not only with the diversity of spa treatments but also with complementary recreational activities regarding the connection to nature and to cultural patrimony as well as to other regional resources, creating effective links to the territory and becoming a significant force that will shape the regional development, by creating a positive pressure on local economic bases with spillover effects on the territory. For instance, and according Araujo, Paiva, Ribeiro & Coutinho (2015), thermal spa treatment is a touristic product that is highly recognized for its potential in the exploration of endogenous regional resources. Consequently, the development of new and competitive thermal tourism products can play an important role in the development of the inland regions, contributing effectively to addressing the economic asymmetries of the region. Particularly in the Galicia Northern Portugal Euroregion this activity still constitutes a vector of sustainable development, serving as leverage for complementary activities like accommodation, restaurants and transports (Ladeiras, Mota, & Pardo, 2015).

On top of this, the researchers Fleus, Azara & Michopoulou (2018), citing Bushell & Sheldon (2009, p.56) highlight the potential identified by governments and the tourism industry itself of wellness tourism – and thermal spa tourism in particular – to serve as a tool for empowering individuals and societies to adopt wellness. In a similar manner, according to Ladeiras et al. (2015), thermalism benefits the cultural industry as it helps boosting the demand for cultural products, promoting local identity and consolidating the feeling of belonging by transforming natural endogenous resources into differentiation elements for the destination and, consequently, improving the local communities' quality of life. In fact, Roget, Dominguez & Brea (2018) identify SPAs businesses as a framework of a company committed with sustainable development because these companies make use of resources without compromising their future, create jobs and generate wealth, settle populations and satisfy needs by improving people's quality of life. As thermalism goes, this activity underwent significant changes throughout the last centuries. It is referred by Del Río-Rama et al. (2014) that thermalism has moved from a tradition that focus solely on the curative purposes for a variety of health conditions – such as respiratory, gastric or rheumatic, among others – to a wider approach that highlights the properties of thermal waters and its benefits for the contemporary society. The changes underwent by thermal tourism and the subsequent diversification of its offer echoed in the type of consumer of this industry. Del Río-Rama et al. (2014) also refers to the objectives of this type of tourism: the improvement of the tourist's health status; rest, quiet and relaxation; contact with nature; aesthetics and beauty. In turn, the consumer is gradually turning away from companies that focus their offer exclusively on health benefits and is now more inclined towards companies that will help him/her occupy his/her leisure time in their facilities but obtaining greater satisfaction through value proposals (Rama, et al., 2014). This shift in the tourist's positioning forces the companies that provide thermal tourism services to give him/her special attention beyond technical quality, as is stated by Rodriguez (2005), since this tourist is not seen as a patient but as a consumer (Del Río-Rama et al., 2014). According to Del Río-Rama et al. (2014), this tourist seeks treatment for his/her physical and mental diseases while, at the same time, searching for a good level of service, adequate accommodation facilities, leisure programs, cultural and sports activities and pleasant natural surroundings.

The development of dermocosmetics based on thermal water carried in nanobiotechnological systems is proposed for its contribution to the differentiation amongst local, unique and genuine products, especially relevant in the case of products with high economic impact in tourism

markets (Araujo et al., 2015). According to Portuguese Thermal Association data, „demand for wellness packages in 2005 registered a growth of 37.1% in relation to 2004, while, in the same period, classical therapeutic thermalism showed negative growth, with a 6% loss in clients. The same trend occurred in the following year, with a fall in the number of classical thermalism users, from 80,309 users in 2005 to 76,999 users in 2006, and growth in the number of wellness thermalism users, to a total of 22,049 users compared to the 17,730 seen in 2005. In 2008, there were 38 active hot springs, 19 of which were located in the centre of Portugal (50% of the total), 16 in the North (42%) and 3 in the South (8%). Wellness has become an important topic of research, as well as a rapidly increasing business. There is demonstrable growth in health and wellness tourism across Europe, as the result of a number of social circumstances” (Quintela, Correia & Antunes, 2010, p.2). Similarly, Loutraki has a long history in Spa & Thermalism. The water derived from the Loutraki natural thermal springs was characterized as “The Water of Life” since antiquity.

The geothermal springs derive from many faults of the coastal area in a 750 -m-wide zone. The natural spring hot waters, at the bottom of Mount Geraneia, are discharged from a great mineral depth. Nowadays, visitors enjoy balneology, spa treatments & wellness sessions in a luxurious environment in the modern Loutraki Thermal Spa. Similarly, wellness tourism is promoted through various services that are practiced in order to relax and rejuvenate. Hot springs have been one such effective method that has tremendously added to the dimensions of the wellness tourism. Naturally occurring hot springs and the use of their water is highly important in various wellness therapies as well as the procedures that are required to provide rejuvenating experience to the guest (Sousa & Alves, 2019). Geothermal energies and hot spring waters are the basis of the wellness therapies like balneotherapy, thermalism etc. The water of these naturally occurring hot springs usually possesses a very high quantity of mineral content that is used extensively for clinical purposes. Spas and other wellness centers run on the mercy of these waters for these waters are the basis for nearly all the wellness therapies (Jagyasi, 2010). Also in thermal tourism context, the process of creation and innovation have been increasingly used to describe business behavior, the destinations, the tourism sector as well as all their planning (Dredge, 2009). However, tourism is going through significant changes, facing new challenges that require new perspectives and implementing ideas (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003).

A Peninsular Northwest perspective

Particularly, in terms of natural resources and thermalism, the Peninsular Northwest (Spain and Portugal) is one of the most important in the Iberian Peninsula, with a large number of quality springs and the richest medicinal mineral waters (Amboage, Fernández, Boga, & Fernández, 2019). However, because this territory is composed by two regions of two different countries, it is easily understandable that in political terms, these two regions live different realities. Cross-border regions may vary, for example, depending on the degree of cooperation (high or low intensity) or geographic extent (low or high). In particular, Euroregions tend to define themselves as micro cross-border regions, with a reduced geographical extension between contiguous spaces. In view of the above, it was intended to carry out fieldwork in the Euro-region North of Portugal and Galicia (as an integral part of the study of cross-border tourist regions), not only for the local convenience but, above all, for the contribution that will be given to it. This Euroregion belongs to two different states: In one of them an autonomous administrative level (Galicia) is created, while in the other (Northern Portugal) an administrative region with no legislative capacity is maintained (Commission for the Coordination and Development of the Region do Norte). According to Sousa (2014), it is a Euro-region with more than 6,000,000 inhabitants, based on a space of strong social, economic and cultural interaction. The Euro-region North of Portugal and Galicia shares a significant cultural and natural heritage, with enormous tourist potential. With the opening of national borders between Member States of the European Union, regional exchange registered a clear increase, both in economic and social terms, creating highly compensatory regional synergies. This region is formed by twelve NUTS III (common nomenclature of statistical territorial units) of which five

constitute the basic border area (Pontevedra and Ourense in Galicia, Cávado, Minho-Lima and Alto Trás-os-Montes in Northern Portugal). In a study on branding and strategy in the Peninsular Northwest, Oliveira (2015) pointed out that as an autonomous region, Galicia has its own regional government with legislative and executive powers in such fields as infrastructure, environment and regional planning, while, in contrast, the Northern Portugal region lacks this autonomy and is ruled by the central government and this limits the region's decision-making capabilities. In terms of thermalism, Galicia stands out as being Europe's second largest thermal region and the city of Ourense is only surpassed by Budapest in number of water reserves (Roget, Dominguez, & Brea, 2018).

According to Roget et al. (2018), Galicia possesses up to 300 water catchments and the largest part of the 116 spas in Spain. It is underlined by Roget et al. (2018) that in Galicia thermal tourism presents itself as a tourism alternative that comprises health, wellbeing and leisure. These researchers point out that a large number of Galician SPAs are located in the inlands, in rural areas characterized by a low-income population and an economic landscape where the primary sector is dominant (Roget et al., 2018). Roget et al. (2018) add that the Galician SPA play an important role of socioeconomic promoters of the municipalities where they are established. Roget et al. (2018) state that these SPAs are generally small sized, family-owned companies of Galician origins. In the beginning of this century, Nóvoa (2010) found that one fifth of all of Spanish SPAs are located in Galicia, with these SPAs generating approximately 126 million euros in wealth and being responsible for directly employing 2700 professionals in the the year of 2009, which served 140 thousand tourists in the same year (Gândara, Brea, & Manosso, 2013). The work of Solla (2012) shows us that by the beginning of the twenty first century, Galician SPAs had a rate of occupancy around 80%. This researcher argues that although a large number of SPAs' customers benefit from public subvention programs, the popularity of SPAs and the services provided in SPAs has significantly increased throughout the years (Solla, 2012). This increase in popularity of SPAs translates into a growth of this market. Roget et al. (2018), referencing DBK (2016) show that in Spain thermalism is a 230 million euro market, with a growth trajectory. Roget et al. (2018) noticed a change in the thermal tourist's demographic profile which is becoming younger. These researchers state that the most proeminent age interval of the thermal tourist is between the age of 46 and 60 years old which contains 46% of these consumers (Roget, Dominguez, & Brea, 2018). Roget et al. (2018) add that the contemporary themal tourist shows a greater interest for his/her health and wellbeing than before.

Over on the Portuguese side, Gustavo (2010) describes the country as a case-study for thermalism due to it abundance of hot springs and the popularity of thermalism. The work of this researchers shows that in the first decade of the twenty first century there were approximately 40 active hot springs in Portugal, most of them located in Northern Portugal and specialized in the therapeutic component of thermalism (Gustavo, 2010). Gustavo (2010) adds that, in recent years Portugal has witnessed an increase in the number of modern SPAs, mostly located in urban areas and often integrated in hotel units. In an important article on Thermal Tourism, the researchers Quintela, Correia, and Antunes (2011) demonstrated that, in 2005, the total number of visitors of Portuguese themal units was approximately 98.000, increasing to approximately 99.000 visitors in the following year. Quintela et al. (2011) also noted that Spanish tourists accounted for a little over half of foreign visitors to Portuguese traditional themal units. These researchers noted that, if on the one hand, the demand for wellness packages increased dignificantly between 2004 and 2005; on the other hand, the demand for classic thermalism in the same period shortened 6% (Quintela et al., 2011). This trend continued in the following years, as is showned by Quintela et al. (2011), however, since the increase wellness tourism was insuficient to offset the decrease in the demand for classical thermalism, portuguese thermal units suffered a decrease in business of 4,3% in that period.

Nevertheless, innovation in thermal tourism and its offer in Peninsular Northwest continued to thrive in the following in years as is shown in the works of researchers such as Roget et al. (2018). These researchers state that, in Galicia, innovative products are being introduced in the

market, integrated in a strategy combined of the public and private sector to promote the thermal sector as an innovative tourism destination for wellbeing and thermalism seekers (Roget et al., 2018). The city of Ourense and its product 'TrenBalnearios' is an example of innovation provided by Roget et al. (2018). This product comprises the mobility of tourists through seven of the province's SPAs (Roget et al., 2018). Another example provided in this article is the CERLAC – the rowing training centre of Laias, Arnoia and Castrelo de Miño – which is a 2014 initiative of Grupo Caldaria and INORDE – Ourense's Economic Development Institute – that combines indoor nautic sports and Laia's SPA infrastructure and services (Roget et al., 2018).

Proposed conceptual model

Preliminary research was conducted in order to develop the research instrument. Details of the preliminary research are given below. After the collection of the preliminary data, empirical data would be collected through fieldwork. This study discusses the increasing phenomena of thermal tourism and the relationship marketing perspective associated to innovation. Based in the literature review, we propose a model that connects the relationship marketing dimensions (i.e. commitment, trust and cooperation) with the consequent satisfaction with thermal tourist and the behavioural intention of repeating the experience or reinforcing the experience with a euroregion marketing and niche tourism perspective. Several studies in marketing and tourism contexts have discussed the association relationship marketing to the site and consumer purchasing behaviour, including the study of satisfaction, loyalty or quality of service (Heung, Kucukusta & Song; 2010). An extensive review of the current literature reveals that no integrated theoretical framework for the holistic study of the innovation and thermal tourism industry exists. The proposed research model not only has implications for future research, but also provides useful information for practitioners in the thermalism. Several studies have shown that more brand commitment and brand trust leads to more positive satisfaction behavior (e.g. Belaid & Temessek Behi, 2011; Sousa & Alves, 2019). The theoretical framework highlights that satisfaction tends to favour the development of behavioural loyalty. These results are particularly evident in tourism contexts, as the example of the importance of satisfaction in revisiting or recommendation family or friends (Bigné et al., 2005; Prayag, 2008; Sousa & Rocha, 2019). Based on this discussion, we propose that, in a context of healthcare and thermal tourism, the increase in trust, cooperation and commitment facilitates the development of behavioural satisfaction and loyalty. The proposed model intended to contribute theoretically to the management of innovation in specific tourism contexts (i.e. thermal tourism) in cross-border tourist destinations (Portugal and Spain, specifically the Peninsular Northwest. The relationship with consumers of thermal tourism was explored, suggesting a conceptual model (to be tested empirically) that relates relational marketing and the result of innovation in tourism (favoring trust, commitment, quality of service, satisfaction and loyalty). The model should be tested empirically in the cross-border tourist area of Peninsular Northwest. Hence we propose that: P1: cooperation has a positive effect on satisfaction of healthcare and thermal tourism; P2: commitment has a positive effect on satisfaction of healthcare and thermal tourism; P3: trust has a positive effect on satisfaction of healthcare and thermal tourism; P4: Satisfaction has a positive effect on the healthcare and thermal tourism.

This study should to reveal the potentials of individual destination attributes to cause satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction, and it shed light on the most determinant and critical attributes in explaining the overall tourist experience, in specific the case of thermal tourism contexts. It is well established in the literature that the tourist's assessment of different destination attributes influences his or her overall satisfaction and, subsequently, intentions to revisit a cross-border destination. Studies typically apply linear modelling techniques in analyzing these influences, such as multiple regression analysis or structural equations modelling and focus group analysis.

Final considerations

In an increasingly global world, which tends to predominate competitiveness and change, the difference is, so often, the ability to create discontinuities in the external environment. Many times the success is the ultimate goal, which focuses on searching for new products, new markets, new organizational forms and new sources of customer value. In this field it inevitably highlights the thermal tourism as some of the examples mentioned in this paper, as vehicles of innovation, and that may prove suitable choices of context for the operationalization of the proposed study. For instance, the creation process associated with for Wellness and SPA reservation systems, mechanisms and information sharing as a form of competitive advantage over other tourist destinations (social networks), the marketing of thermal and health tourism products and services as well as other related activities that can leverage the increased business synergies. It should be noted generators entrepreneurship factors that may trigger an entrepreneurial activity (particularly in thermal tourism contexts); and whose origin may be associated with internal, external factors and characteristics of the organization. The external factors are more difficult to control: political, economic, social, technological, environmental factors or legal issues. However, the combination of those factors with the intrinsic nature will form the basis of an innovative event, along with the organizational characteristics (e.g. culture, values and business traditions). Finally, and this manuscript is primarily theoretical and reflection, is expected to arise in the future some work of a practical nature that bring greater robustness to support and perspectives presented. In terms of thermalism, Peninsular Northwest stands out as being Europe's second largest thermal region and the city of Orense is only surpassed by Budapest in number of water reserves. Galicia possesses up to 300 water catchments and the largest part of the 116 spas in Spain. In recent years Portugal has witnessed an increase in the number of modern SPAs, mostly located in urban areas and often integrated in hotel units. The present manuscript intended to contribute theoretically to the management of innovation in specific tourism contexts (i.e. thermal tourism) in cross-border tourist destinations (Portugal and Spain, specifically the Peninsular Northwest). In the end, the relationship with consumers of thermal tourism was explored, suggesting a conceptual model that relates relational marketing and the result of innovation in tourism (favoring trust, commitment, quality of service, satisfaction and loyalty). The model should be tested empirically in the cross-border tourist area of Peninsular Northwest. We intent to show shows how these valid questions can be answered by introducing causal modelling and discussing one approach to it, structural equation modelling (SEM), which is a rigorous technique for building and testing such models. An advanced statistical methodology delivers models and results that are easy to understand and employ. We intent to confirm that a causal relationship exists (i.e. measurement over time should confirm that change in one variable precedes change in the other; a controlled experiment is required that changes a single variable; the direction of causality must be correctly specified; the relationship must not disappear when common causes of both are removed and the causal effect 'makes sense' in domain knowledge), (Elliott, 2003). This study has already identified that the global movement of tourism is seemingly showing an increased focus on the thermal tourism (niche product or niche service). In this case, the question seems to be whether the further growth in demand for healthcare management and thermal tourism. A future study should include emotional factors. The new vogue of thermal tourism forces us to challenge and re-visit the power relationships that exist within contemporary tourism and the host-guest relationship.

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