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## **ENCOURAGING RELATIONAL MARKETING IN THE WELLNESS AND THERMALISM SEGMENTS**

### **ЗАОХОЧЕННЯ МАРКЕТИНГУ ВІДНОСИН У СЕГМЕНТАХ ВЕЛНЕС- І ТЕРМАЛЬНОГО ТУРИЗМУ**

*The article is dedicated to a tourism segment, especially health, wellness and thermal tourism that are becoming an increasingly popular option for visitors looking to access procedures that are seemingly unavailable to them in their home countries due to lack of affordability, lack of availability or lengthy waiting lists. The better understanding regarding the essence of innovation process and relational marketing: theoretical and practical implications, in specific contexts of health, wellness and thermal tourism in cross-border destinations are provided. This article is suggested as a conceptual paper with a literature review that brings together the major components of innovation and its implications tourist perspective and relationship marketing (i.e. visitor perspective). On the base of in-deep analysis of the scientific literature the classification of health and medical tourism has undergone further development. The presented investigation intends to contribute theoretically to the management of innovation in specific tourism contexts (i.e. wellness, health, and thermal tourism) in cross-border tourist destinations (Portugal and Spain, specifically the Euroregion of Northern Portugal and Galicia). A conceptual model that summarizes the dynamic nature of the triggering process was adapted to the processes in health, wellness, and thermal tourism. A cross-border region as a territory on the border composed of local governments involved in cross-border cooperation agreements was defined. There were also proved that cross-border regions may vary, for example, depending on the degree of cooperation (high or low intensity) or geographic extent (low or high). The special attention to Euroregion which tend to define themselves as micro cross-border regions, with a reduced geographical extension between contiguous spaces was paid. The conceptual model that relates relational marketing and the result of innovation in tourism (favoring trust, commitment, quality of service, satisfaction and loyalty) was suggested. The proposed model describes the relationship between the following variables: cooperation, satisfaction of healthcare and thermal tourism; commitment and satisfaction of healthcare and thermal tourism; trust and satisfaction of healthcare and thermal tourism; general satisfaction of the healthcare and thermal tourism.*

**Keywords:** thermal tourism, cross-border destination, relationship marketing, wellness.

*Стаття присвячена сегменту туризму, особливо оздоровчому, велнес та термальному, які стають все більш популярними варіантами для відвідувачів, охочих отримати доступ до процедур, що виявляються недоступними для них у їхніх рідних країнах через відсутність коштів, відсутність доступності або тривалого очікування у списках бажаних. Удосконалено розуміння сутності інноваційного процесу та реляційного маркетингу: теоретичні та практичні наслідки для оздоровчого, велнес та термального туризму в транскордонних напрямках. Ця стаття пропонується як концептуальна робота з оглядом літератури, яка об'єднує основні компоненти інновацій та їх наслідків з точки зору туриста і маркетингу відносин (тобто з точки зору відвідувача). На основі глибокого аналізу наукової літератури зазнала подальшого розвитку класифікація оздоровчого та медичного туризму. Представлене дослідження покликане здійснити теоретичний внесок в управління інноваціями в конкретних туристичних контекстах (тобто оздоровчий, лікувальний і термальний туризм) в транскордонних туристичних напрямках (Португалія і Іспанія, зокрема, Євросоюз Північної Португалії та Галісії). Концептуальна модель, яка узагальнює динамічну природу процесу запуску, була адаптована до процесів в оздоровчому, велнес та термальному туризмі. Було дано визначення транскордонного регіону як території на кордоні, що складається з місцевих органів влади, що беруть участь в угодах про транскордонне співробітництво. Також було доведено, що транскордонні регіони можуть відрізнятися, наприклад, залежно від ступеня співробітництва (висока або низька інтенсивність) або географічної протяжності (низька або висока). Особливу увагу було приділено Євросоюзам, які схильні визначати себе як мікро-транскордонні регіони, зі зменшеною географічною протяжністю між суміжними просторами. Була запропонована концептуальна модель, що пов'язує маркетинг відносин і результат інновацій в туризмі (довіра, прихильність, якість послуг, задоволеність і лояльність). Запропонована модель описує взаємозв'язок між такими змінними: співпраця, задоволеність медичним і тепловим туризмом; прихильність і задоволеність медичним і тепловим туризмом; довіра та задоволеність медичним і тепловим туризмом; загальна задоволеність медичним і тепловим туризмом.*

**Ключові слова:** термальний туризм, транскордонний напрямок, маркетинг відносин, велнес.

**Introduction.** Tourism is a dynamic, economic, and social phenomenon due to its ability to create cross-border and euro region development. According to Ratten et al. [1], there has been increasing recognition of the way tourism can be innovative, particularly through creative means (e.g. health tourism, including wellness, and spa/thermal/therapeutical tourism [2]). This is important in specific services developed that integrate technology and sustainability trends. A topic that has been of interest for several years, the role of innovation in tourism is growing. There are two different main reasons for the dynamic growth. Firstly, the tourism sector has been the booster for new technological innovations that have created new segments and niches (e.g. medical tourism [3, 4]), and secondly, the tourism sector has many small-sized enterprises include tourism providers such as travel agencies, hotels, transport companies or educational providers. The creation process in tourism contributes to business success and increased competitive advantage, which is a theme that has clearly captured the attention of academics in the field of tourism management. The dynamic nature of this process, coupled with the constant need to invest in a highly distinctive and differentiating offering

new research have provided to score market position and achieve tourism consumer satisfaction, including the level of emerging realities confirmed by new trends and desires [5].

Tourism 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 tourism economy [3]. There is a lot of knowledge about tourism innovation and management, but less is known about specific aspects of wellness, health and thermal. 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 [6]. Therefore, relationship marketing in wellness and thermal tourism can be defined as creating, maintaining, and improving the mutually beneficial relations or possible termination of unfavourable relationships of healthcare management and thermal tourism with stakeholders. This is undertaken to satisfy the stakeholder's need and to seek consensus between guest and wellness management and thermalism interests in development of tourism experiences.

**Setting objectives.** The aim of the study is to develop theoretical knowledge and their practical application for health, wellness and thermal tourism in cross-border areas, which will be carried out based on analysis of understanding the essence of the innovation process and relationship marketing.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks were identified:

- to consider the essence of the innovation process and relational marketing: theoretical and practical implications for health, wellness and thermal tourism in cross-border areas;
- to carry out the classification of health and medical tourism;
- to adapt to the processes in health, wellness and thermal tourism a conceptual model that summarizes the dynamic nature of the launch process;
- to develop a conceptual model that links relationship marketing and the outcome of innovation in tourism.

**Methodology.** The theoretical and methodological basis of the study are the scientific works of leading scientists in the field of relational marketing in tourism, especially in segments of health, wellness and thermal tourism. The solution of scientific problems was carried out using the following research methods: analysis and synthesis (to study the understanding of the essence of the innovation process and relational marketing, as well as to develop the classification of health and medical tourism); methods of comparison and generalization (for the analysis of marketing practice and modern experience of introduction of innovations and formation of system of marketing of relations); systemic and integrated approaches (to identify problems and prospects for further development of cross-border regions, as well as the development of a conceptual model that links the marketing of relations and the result of innovation in tourism).

**Research results.** Tourism is a phenomenon that moves millions of people around the world, taking as a major driver of the global economy [7]. Every year, much due to the several changes in the tourism environment, fosters competition between and within tourist destinations [8]. Like other emerging sectors of the modern economy, thermal

tourism is a dynamic and constantly changing industry. (e.g. wellness and thermal centres or specific organizations).

As such, comes an increasing need to understand the consumer behavior of wellness, health, and thermal destinations. According to Lordkipanidze et al. (2005) [9], the growth of the tourism sector and increasing demand about new tourism segments, makes it even more visible and required its connection with the emerging trends in companies (e.g. thermalism, 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 participant in the distribution channel within the operational management of tourism will be critical in assessing the range and nature of emerging changes [9]. Wellness, health, 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 [2].

Most of the research and studies have focused on the following themes: 1) the reasons for growth; 2) conceptualization and definition, 3) quality and accreditation; 4) services offered and types of care; 5) health tourism destinations; and 6) consumer attitudes towards health tourism. For instance, according to Lee et al. [10], health tourism has existed since at least the 19th century when people started to travel to other areas for healing and relaxation such as at spas and springs. Modern health, wellness and thermal tourism is grounded in what is commonly referred to as push and pull factors [3]. Push factors include inflated health care costs [11], a shortage of care personnel in the public health care system, long wait times and low-quality care for the cost of treatment; while pull factors are favorable currency exchange rates, improvement of medical standards, and the development of air transportation [10].

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 spill over effects on the territory [12]. 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. On top of this, the researchers 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) [13], thermalism benefits the cultural industry as it helps increasing the demand for cultural products, promoting local identity, and strengthening a sense of belonging by transforming natural endogenous resources into elements of differentiation for the destination and, as a result, improving the quality of life of local communities.

In fact, Roget, Dominguez & Brea [14] 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. [15] 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 that thermal tourism has undergone, and the subsequent diversification of its offer have affected the type of consumers in this industry. Del Río-Rama et al. [15] also refer to the objectives of this type of tourism: the improvement of the tourist's health status; rest and relaxation; contact with nature; aesthetics and beauty. 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 Míguez [16], since this tourist is not seen as a patient but as a consumer. 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.

Likewise, wellness tourism is promoted through various services aimed at relaxation and rejuvenation. 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. Geothermal energies and hot spring waters are the basis of the wellness therapies like balneootherapy, 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 [2].

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 [17]. However, tourism is going through significant changes, facing new challenges that require new perspectives and implementing ideas [18].

Relationship marketing aims to generate profitable, long-term relationships between partners [19]. Gupta & Sahu [20] argue that an "effective relationship marketing program delivers better results in terms of increasing customer base, sales, and profitability." [20, p. 63] Marketing literature refers some important dimensions of relationship marketing, such as commitment, trust, cooperation, among others, factors that are very important for any business to consider in their marketing program [20]. Several authors (e.g. [3]) consider that the concept of trust encompasses three other important dimensions: the belief that the other he will show benevolence in his actions; honesty and the belief that the other intervener will have competence to act in favor of the relationship between the two. Trust and commitment are fundamental elements for the success of the relationship marketing strategy. Trust decreases perceived risk and vulnerability in a relationship, which leads to

a greater commitment to the relationship. Inter-company relations are guided by relational factors such as commitment standards, which are based on trust [21]. In the relationship between exporters and distributors, collaboration is essential as it helps companies cope with the complexity and multitude of distribution challenges across borders. Several authors propose the following definitions for the construct cooperation. Also, given the above, and since the supply of health and thermal tourism can be designed to specific markets, we suggest that commitment, trust, and cooperation, can be assumed as a relevant variable to visitor satisfaction and consequent loyalty. This situation is strongly related to the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit in health and well-being activities. Entrepreneurial activity is seen as a process includes a set of steps, is subject to tourism management, continuous and applicable in many contexts [22]. This process becomes a source of competitive advantage on a global scale. A conceptual model that summarizes the dynamic nature of the triggering process to summarize the various contributions on this topic [22, 26].

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.

The definition of the concept of cross-border region (CBR) depends, in the first instance, on what we understand to be cross-border cooperation. Regarding the concept of CBR, there are several definitions around it. However, the definitions used by the European Council, determine that these regions are characterized by homogeneous goals and functional interdependence, otherwise there would be no need for such cooperation and the fact that the region is considered as potential, inherent in geography, history, ecology, ethnic groups, economic possibilities among other issues, but that was fragmented by the sovereignty of central governments responsible for each side of the border. On the other hand, these are spatial units in which there is a strong internal interaction when compared to external relations.

Thus, a cross-border region can be defined as “a territory on the border composed of local governments involved in cross-border cooperation agreements” [23, p. 156]. Cross-border cooperation can be divided considering its geographic reach (be it greater or lesser), the area where the region is inserted, the intensity of cooperation (namely the degree of autonomy) and even considering it counts the type of actors that go from the municipal (local) to the regional level. Contextualizing this study in terms of the Euroregion of North Portugal and Galicia requires its geographical definition. This Euroregion comprises the lands in the Iberian Peninsula delimited by Atlantic Ocean, the eastern mountains, and the Douro River. Far more important than its frontiers, for the Euroregion’s identity are the resources, namely the natural resources therein, with unique common elements that can be found both in Galicia and Northern Portugal such as an axis of thermal waters. Particularly, in terms of natural resources and thermalism, this Euroregion is one of the most important in the Iberian Peninsula, with many quality springs and the richest medicinal mineral waters [24].

However, because this Euroregion 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). Euroregion's tend to define themselves as micro cross-border regions, with a reduced geographical extension between contiguous spaces.

Based on a literature review, we propose a model that integrates relationship marketing aspects (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 (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 – Relationship marketing and behavioural intentions in thermal tourism services  
Source: own study based on [3]

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 [4, 25]. 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. 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. Based on this discussion, we suggest that in the context of health and thermal tourism, increased trust, cooperation and commitment contribute to the development of behavioral 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 Euroregion of Northern Portugal and Galicia).

**Conclusions.** In an increasingly globalized world, in which it is increasingly difficult for enterprises to remain competitive, in many cases success depends on the effective search for new products, new markets, new organizational forms and new sources of customer value. Wellness tourism is often the leader in this area, primarily due to the introduction of innovative wellness and spa booking systems, improvement of information exchange mechanisms, etc. activities that can help increase business synergy. Wellness, health, and thermal tourism has become an emerging market segment, intended not only for those seeking exclusively thermal treatments, but also for those seeking disease prevention, physical improvement, and spiritual balance, or even for those who crave cultural and relaxation programs.

In developing mentioned areas, relationship marketing plays significant role. Relationship marketing in wellness and thermal tourism can be defined as creating, maintaining, and improving the mutually beneficial relations or possible termination of unfavourable relationships of healthcare management and thermal tourism with stakeholders. Studied types of tourism determine the developing level of a transboundary region, that can be defined as a border area made up of local authorities involved in transboundary cooperation agreements". In turn, cross-border cooperation can be divided according to its geographic coverage (more or less), the territory in which the region is located, the intensity of cooperation (namely the degree of autonomy), and even considering the type of actors who move from the municipal (local) to the regional level.

Based on the study of the scientific literature, a model was proposed that links the dimensions of relationship marketing (i.e. commitment, trust, and cooperation) with the subsequent satisfaction from thermal tourism and the behavioral intention to repeat the experience or amplify the experience in terms of marketing of the Euroregion and niche tourism. A feature of the model is that it links relational marketing and the result of innovation in tourism (favoring trust, commitment, quality of service, satisfaction and loyalty). It follows from the model that: P1: cooperation has a positive effect on satisfaction with medical and thermal tourism; P2: Commitment has a positive effect on satisfaction with health and thermal tourism; P3: Trust has a positive effect on satisfaction with health and thermal tourism; P4: Satisfaction has a positive effect on medical and thermal tourism.

The main direction of further research should be the verification of the proposed model empirically in the cross-border tourist area of Northern Portugal and Galicia (with the partnership of 4 thermal tourism companies, as one of the main types of tourism common to the territorial space.

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