





## Challenges and opportunities of strategic communication in health and wellness tourism in Portugal


Retos y oportunidades de la comunicación estratégica en el turismo  
de salud y bienestar en Portugal

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### Abstract

The growing focus on wellness and well-being has led to the consolidation of health and wellness tourism as a strategic part of the tourism economy in Portugal. This study analyses how regional tourism boards communicate these concepts and explores the challenges and opportunities presented by this rapidly changing market. The study examined the evolution of communication related to health and wellness in tourism between 2020 and 2022 based on a literature review, analysis of institutional websites and monitoring of digital trends. The results show a predominant focus on spa tourism and limited exploitation of the concept of well-being in a broader sense. The research

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highlights the need for more innovative and diversified communication strategies capable of attracting tourists seeking a holistic balance between physical, mental, and emotional health. Effectively communicating this distinctive value will be essential to strengthening Portugal's competitiveness and resilience in a constantly evolving sector.

**Keywords:** strategic communication, destination branding, tourism marketing, health and wellness tourism, well-being

### Resumen

El turismo de salud y bienestar se ha consolidado como un segmento estratégico en Portugal, impulsado por la creciente importancia del bienestar físico y emocional desde marzo de 2020. Este estudio examina cómo las entidades regionales de turismo comunican estos temas y analiza los desafíos y oportunidades en un mercado en constante evolución. A través de una revisión de la literatura, del análisis de sitios web institucionales y del seguimiento de tendencias digitales, se evaluó la evolución de la comunicación sobre salud y bienestar en el turismo entre 2020 y 2022.

Los resultados revelan que la comunicación sigue centrada en el termalismo, con una limitada integración de un concepto más amplio de bienestar. El estudio destaca la necesidad de estrategias de comunicación más innovadoras y diversificadas para atraer a turistas que buscan un equilibrio entre salud física, mental y emocional. Comunicar eficazmente este valor será clave para mejorar la competitividad y la resiliencia de Portugal en este sector en evolución.

**Palabras clave:** comunicación estratégica, marca de destino, mercadotecnia turística, turismo de salud y bienestar, bienestar

## 1. ADAPTATIONS IN TOURISM AND PRODUCT COMMUNICATION AFTER THE CRISIS

The tourism sector and society have undergone profound transformations due to global events that have reshaped how destinations are promoted and perceived. Among these, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the health crisis that emerged in Portugal in early 2020 stand out. This period brought about substantial changes in values, social behaviours and consumption patterns, which had a direct impact on people's lives and decision-making processes (Sousa, 2022).

Following the declaration of a state of emergency and the imposition of lockdown measures, the tourism sector experienced an almost total standstill, while remote working became a reality for many employees. Companies that managed to survive this context were forced to adapt swiftly, navigating a global environment of heightened

uncertainty, described as a "new world (dis)order" (Carreiras, 2020). The economic impact was severe, with several countries, still recovering from the 2008 financial crisis, losing the economic progress they had made (Pinéu, 2020).

Between 2020 and 2022, air travel experienced a sharp decline, coupled with rising costs, which restricted travel opportunities to higher-income groups. In terms of consumption, concerns about products from certain regions drove a growing demand for local alternatives, leading to significant shifts in purchasing behaviour (Rodrigues, 2020).

Teixeira (2021) underscores that the public health crisis which rocked the world profoundly affected the economy and social life, challenging both governments and businesses in their ability to respond. Numerous organisations, particularly in the tourism sector, did not survive the crisis and were forced to close, while others successfully adapted by reinventing themselves through digitalisation.

According to the Portuguese Digital Economy Association (ACEPI, 2023), the pandemic significantly accelerated the digital transformation of companies which responded effectively to new demands. Fonseca emphasises that the use of digital tools became more widespread, with the Internet increasingly being used for activities such as e-commerce, which played a central role in transactions (ACEPI, 2023).

The Digital Economy Study reveals that approximately 60% of Internet users in Portugal began shopping online, exceeding the previous projection of 50%. Similarly, the digital presence of Portuguese companies increased from 40% in 2019 to 60% in 2023, a growth driven by both the crisis and government initiatives, such as the Digital Commerce Programme, developed in partnership with the Portuguese government (ACEPI, 2023). In the tourism sector, digitalisation has proven to be an essential solution for tackling the economic crisis. Companies have invested in new technologies using Artificial Intelligence to reduce the need for physical interaction at airports and hotels. In the hotel industry, solutions such as online check-in and check-out, virtual concierges, and augmented reality have allowed the quality of the customer experience to be maintained, despite social distancing restrictions. Moreover, virtual tours have become a viable and safe alternative, enabling tourists to explore destinations from the comfort of their homes, avoiding crowds (Aveiro Tech-City, 2023).

Through digital tools like Google, it has been possible to map the tourist journey, analysing search behaviour and destination choices. This data is of great value to tourism professionals, enabling them to develop more effective marketing strategies, tailored to the new needs of tourists (Aveiro Tech-City, 2023).

Maintaining active communication with consumers during lockdown periods was crucial for the survival of many businesses. Those who maintained continuous contact with their customers were able to sustain operations and, once restrictions were lifted, recover more quickly. However, there is still a need to train professionals in the sector

to use digital platforms more strategically, enabling them to promote tourism products more effectively. In this context, the aim of this article is to raise awareness among tourism managers of the importance of strategic and up-to-date communication, adapted to new social trends, to effectively promote tourism products. This study seeks to answer the following research questions: "To what extent can wellness and well-being be defined, and what are the differences between these concepts?"

How are regional tourism entities in Portugal communicating the services and products associated with health and well-being?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this research primarily involved a comprehensive review of scientific literature, focusing on indexed journals and pivotal technical studies, supplemented by data sourced from internationally recognised reports and credible sources. Digital tools were used to track trends within the sector, enabling a thorough analysis of communication practices in the health and wellness tourism industry. This methodological approach facilitated the identification of key challenges and opportunities in a dynamic market, contributing to the establishment of a solid and relevant theoretical framework.

The research used databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, alongside credible media outlets and reports from renowned consultancy companies such as Gallup and the Global Wellness Report. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with key influencers in the health and wellness sector, alongside a detailed analysis of the industry's core terminology.

Additionally, a trend analysis was performed using Google Trends to examine the terms "wellness" and "well-being" across three key periods: pre-crisis (January 2020), during the crisis (March 2020), and post-crisis (April 2023). The aim was to explore the rising interest in these topics and evaluate whether the pandemic heightened public awareness regarding health and well-being.

## 3. REINVENTING TOURISM COMMUNICATION: FROM RESILIENCE IN TIMES OF CRISIS TO THE PROMOTION OF WELL-BEING

The 2020 pandemic brought about profound changes, not only in the communication of tourist destinations, but also in the global emphasis on health and well-being. Prior to this period, tourism communication had been predominantly focused on in-person experiences, encouraging travel and direct contact with destinations. However, the landscape shifted dramatically with lockdowns and travel restrictions. The core message became the importance of staying home and staying safe. The phrase "Everything will be alright" gained widespread recognition, spreading a message of hope across various media platforms. As lockdowns were lifted, the discourse shifted towards promoting

safety measures, such as social distancing and hygiene, with campaigns like “Vá para fora cá dentro” encouraging domestic tourism (Beleza 2020).

Throughout 2020, Turismo de Portugal, in collaboration with various organisations, launched the “Clean & Safe<sup>4</sup>” certification. This seal was developed to restore tourists' confidence in Portugal, ensuring that participating entities adhered to strict health safety standards. Subsequently, the seal was incorporated into the European Tourism Covid-19 Safety Seal, which further enhanced the destination's international credibility. During this period, digital communication and online marketing became essential for keeping tourism brands 'top of mind' with consumers via digital platforms. Turismo de Portugal responded by offering free online training in areas such as digital marketing, sustainability, and "Clean & Safe" certification through the Digital Academy and its hospitality and tourism schools. This effort aimed to equip professionals with the necessary skills to navigate the emerging challenges of the digital environment.

Simultaneously, the pandemic amplified the emphasis on health and well-being, both personally and professionally. The impact of the health crisis highlighted the pressing need to promote healthier and more balanced lifestyles, not only among company employees but also across society as a whole (Cofina Boost Content, 2022). This reflects a broader transformation that transcends the tourism sector, embracing the growing significance of both wellness and well-being concepts.

### **3.1. Concepts of wellness, well-being, health, and well-being**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as more than merely the absence of disease, encompassing both physical and mental well-being. The promotion of health and well-being is also central to the 3rd United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) (United Nations, 2023). The term wellness first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1654, though principles related to well-being can be traced back to ancient civilisations such as Greece, Rome, and Asia.

According to the Global Wellness Institute (GWI), the concept of wellness gained popularity between the 1950s and 1970s, driven by doctors and thinkers advocating for health preservation through a balanced and active lifestyle. A key milestone was the publication of Halbert L. Dunn's “High-Level Wellness” model in 1961, which promoted the idea of conscious and proactive well-being (Global Wellness Institute, 2023).

The wellness movement became widespread in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s through corporate wellness programmes and government initiatives aimed at promoting physical health and healthy habits. By the 1990s, this model had expanded

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<sup>4</sup> The “Clean and Safe” label was launched by Turismo de Portugal in collaboration with various partners in 2020, with its requirements being updated as the COVID-19 pandemic evolved. Later, its scope was broadened to include other safety aspects.

to Europe, with the establishment of the German Wellness Association and the European Wellness Union (Global Wellness Institute, 2023).

However, despite its growing popularity, the terms wellness and well-being are not used consistently, often leading to confusion. In Portugal, there is no clear distinction between these terms, and both are frequently understood as synonyms for health and well-being. According to Pendell (2021), wellness specifically refers to physical well-being, the absence of illness, and the adoption of a healthy lifestyle. This concept includes aspects such as balanced nutrition, regular exercise, and good sleep quality.

On the other hand, well-being has a broader scope, encompassing five essential dimensions: professional, social, financial, physical, and community well-being. These dimensions relate to various aspects of life, such as job satisfaction, meaningful social relationships, effective money management, physical health, and contentment with one's living environment (Pendell, 2021).

For Ellis (2017), the concept of wellness is evolving towards a more preventive and health-oriented approach, while well-being is more closely associated with the pursuit of happiness. People are increasingly focusing on measures such as the "Well-being Index" and the United Nations' "World Happiness Report". Interestingly, some countries with the highest health indexes are not necessarily the happiest, highlighting the crucial influence of emotional and social well-being on overall happiness.

A study conducted by Gallup in the United States compared two groups of adults: one that incorporated wellness into their daily lives and another that practiced well-being across the five dimensions. The study, which examined factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, income, education, region, and marital status, found that the group focused solely on wellness had a higher rate of work absences, with over 68% experiencing annual absenteeism due to illness. Furthermore, this group was more likely to file lawsuits against their employers and was twice as likely to change jobs (Pendell, 2021). These findings highlight that wellness alone is insufficient to ensure productivity and job satisfaction. Thus, wellness should be viewed as one element of well-being. For instance, a person may follow a healthy diet and exercise regularly, but if they suffer from anxiety or face bullying in the workplace, their emotional well-being will be compromised. In such cases, despite practising wellness, the individual does not achieve true well-being, as their emotional health is out of balance.

The term *well-being* derives from the combination of "well" and "being," implying a holistic perspective on the individual. Uberoi (2021) draws a clear distinction between the two concepts, explaining that wellness serves as the tool, whereas well-being represents the ultimate goal. Wellness offers tools like mindfulness, exercise, and balanced diets to support physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. However, the author points out that the hospitality sector often confuses the two, prioritising

wellness services (like advanced technology) over creating experiences that foster genuine well-being.

Alongside the increasing recognition of wellness and well-being, it is essential to highlight the progress made in Portugal, as reflected in the Well-being Index (IBE). This indicator reveals a positive trend in both quality of life and material conditions from 2004 to 2019, with significant improvements observed after 2014 (INE, 2020).

### **3.2. The impact of remote work on mental health and the management of corporate well-being**

The year 2020 introduced a new reality to the world of work, with the rapid adoption of remote work as an essential measure to ensure business continuity due to the demands of the pandemic. However, this abrupt shift had a significant impact on workers' mental health. Social distancing, isolation, and uncertainty about the future contributed to increased levels of anxiety, depression, burnout, and other mental health disorders, as reported by the National Health Service (Serviço Nacional de Saúde, 2023). Economic difficulties, unemployment, and loss of income further exacerbated this situation.

The transition to remote work also posed several challenges. Many workers faced increasing uncertainty as they adapted to new home-based work routines, which had a detrimental impact on their mental health. The report *Healthy and Safe Telework: Technical Brief*, published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), highlights the risks associated with prolonged remote work, stressing the importance of safeguarding workers' mental health (WHO, 2021). According to the Portuguese National Statistics Institute, between April and June 2020, approximately 23.1% of the employed population in Portugal began working from home. According to the Portuguese National Statistics Institute, between April and June 2020, around 23.1% of Portugal's employed population shifted to working from home. This percentage, unimaginable just a few years earlier, highlights the swift adoption of remote work during the pandemic (Cofina Boost Content, 2022). Today, corporate well-being is seen as a crucial strategy for attracting and retaining top talent. Quintela (2022) highlights that well-being initiatives are becoming increasingly valued and prioritised by companies. However, despite these investments, many organisations still promote practices such as sending emails or scheduling meetings outside of working hours. Chen and Petrick (2013) highlight that wellness experiences deliver substantial physical and mental benefits, including stress reduction and burnout prevention. These experiences enhance emotional health and overall well-being for both individuals and tourists, serving as a crucial factor for the success of destinations focused on wellness offerings.

In 2017, Ricardo Costa, CEO of the Bernardo da Costa Group, became a pioneer in Portugal by establishing a dedicated Happiness Department. This autonomous unit focuses on supporting employees in achieving a healthy balance between their professional and personal lives. The company offers benefits tailored to meet the individual needs of each employee. The CEO emphasises that happiness is profitable, stating that "people give back to the company what they receive from it" (Mateus, 2023). Altronix has consistently been ranked among the TOP20<sup>5</sup> Happiest Organisations in Portugal - a distinction it has upheld from 2013 to 2024. The company has shown a strong commitment to implementing best practices in human resource management, with a focus on policies that prioritise employee motivation and long-term satisfaction. For Rui Fonseca, CEO of Altronix, ensuring genuine employee well-being in the workplace requires careful and proactive planning<sup>6</sup>.

According to Marques (2023), factors such as happiness, well-being, and organisational culture are playing an increasingly important role in decision-making, influencing both companies and individuals when selecting locations for investments, conventions, business events, or family trips.

#### **4. RESEARCH DYNAMICS AND THE EVOLVING INTEREST IN WELLNESS AND WELL-BEING**

Liao et al. (2023) highlight that health and wellness tourism is closely linked to improving quality of life, enabling tourists to achieve a balance between physical health and mental well-being, which ultimately results in greater personal satisfaction and overall well-being. They also emphasise that this type of tourism offers environmental health benefits by promoting contact with nature and more balanced lifestyles, thereby enhancing both the physical and emotional well-being of tourists.

Statistics from the Digital Report 2022 by Kepios, concerning Portugal, indicate that Google is the most frequently used search engine, with approximately 95% of internet users relying on it. According to Google Trends' "Interest over time" indicator, searches conducted in January 2020 for the term wellness on Google scored 52, indicating relatively low popularity. The term well-being had shown no recorded search activity, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

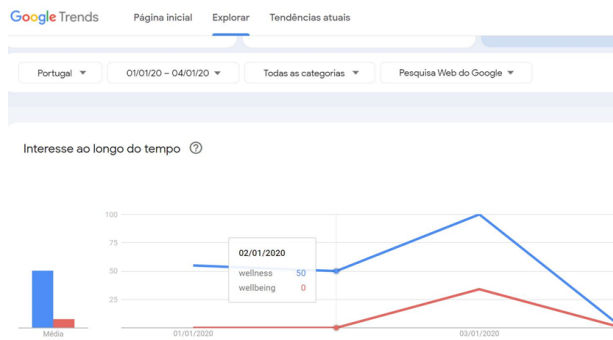
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<sup>5</sup> The TOP 20 Happiest Organisations in Portugal by Revista Exame is available at <https://happinessworks.pt/edicao/2024-ranking-exame-happiness-works>

<sup>6</sup> This information was shared in an interview with Rui Fonseca.

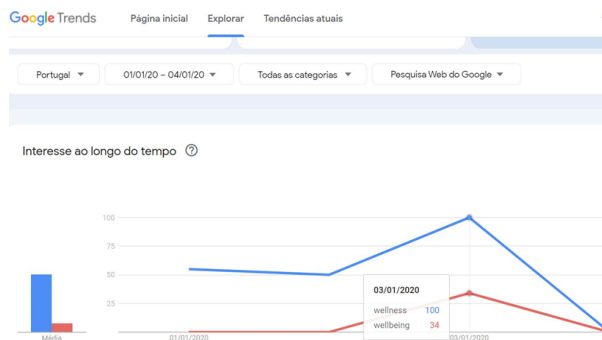


**Figure 1.** Search volume for the terms wellness and well-being (source: Google Trends, 2020 January)



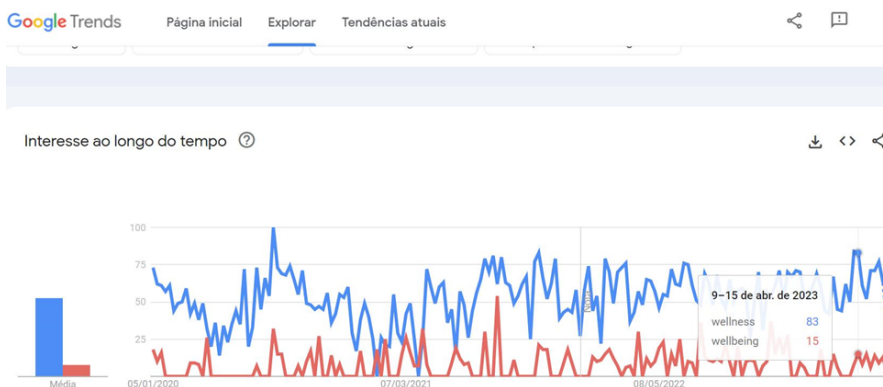
An analysis of searches for the same terms during March 2020, the period when the pandemic broke out in Portugal, reveals that searches for the term wellness surged to 100, the maximum interest score. The term well-being reached a score of 34, still with limited visibility.

**Figure 2.** Search volume for the terms wellness and well-being (source: Google Trends, 2020 March)



An analysis of Google searches in April 2023 reveals that the term wellness remained close to a value of 100, indicating consistently high interest. Well-being, on the other hand, had shown little to no visibility in these searches in Portugal.

**Figure 3.** Search volume for the terms wellness and well-being (source: Google Trends, 2023 April)



An analysis of Google searches indicates that in Portugal, the term wellness is searched more frequently than well-being. This disparity may stem from several factors, including greater familiarity with and a broader understanding of the term wellness. In response to this growing interest, consumers have become increasingly discerning, seeking products that enhance quality of life, promote environmental sustainability and come from companies with a clear mission and purpose (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

Mental health is one of the fastest-growing sectors, with increasing concern about mental well-being among individuals and businesses. Issues such as loneliness, stress, depression, and anxiety are now central topics (Peralta, 2023).

According to the Global Wellness Institute (2020), the global mental health market is expected to generate revenues of around €127 billion. Popular goods and services in this sector include sustainable products, transformative experiences, coaching courses, self-help books, wellness apps, and healthy eating.

Additionally, the data shows that tourists increasingly expect health and wellness tourism to offer packages combining travel experiences with health treatments, whether traditional or alternative. To meet these expectations, destination marketing organisations should focus on creating experiences that seamlessly integrate health and wellness with tourism (Majeed & Kim, 2022).

#### **4.1. Promoting health and wellness tourism in Portugal: an analysis of the strategies of regional entities**

Health and wellness tourists seek a range of benefits, including transcendence, improved physical health, and the restoration of self-esteem (Voigt et al., 2011). Integrating these elements can help Portugal attract tourists seeking physical and emotional renewal. Beyond providing rest and rejuvenation, health and wellness tourism plays a vital role in preventive healthcare. Chen and Petrick (2013) argue that wellness travel enhances both physical and emotional well-being, presenting an opportunity for Portugal to position itself as a leading destination for preventive tourism. Similarly, Liao et al. (2023) emphasise that health and wellness tourism can significantly enhance tourists' physical well-being by encouraging outdoor activities and fostering a connection with nature, which improves overall health and boosts vitality.

Turismo de Portugal and Portugal's main regions have begun to incorporate the concept of wellness in their tourism communications, although in a still limited manner. On the Turismo de Portugal website<sup>7</sup> there is a "health and wellness" section under the "experiences" category, where some national offerings are mentioned, such as thermal baths, thalassotherapy, resorts, and spas. However, the information provided is rather

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<sup>7</sup> The page related to health and well-being of the entity Turismo de Portugal is available at [www.visitportugal.com/pt-pt/experiencias/saude-e-bem-estar](http://www.visitportugal.com/pt-pt/experiencias/saude-e-bem-estar)

limited, lacking in-depth content, leaving much of this tourism segment's potential still unexplored.

Certain regions, by contrast, have taken more tangible steps to promote health and wellness as a key feature of their tourism offerings. Liao et al. (2023) argue that health and wellness tourism offers clear psychological benefits, reducing stress and anxiety while enhancing emotional stability, particularly through relaxing activities in natural environments.

The regional entity Turismo do Porto e Norte features a dedicated section on its website highlighting key areas such as thermal baths, thermal spas, ecotourism, and natural parks. This page links directly to a specialised website for the Porto and North Thermal Baths, reinforcing the association between well-being and the Porto and North destination, demonstrating a more structured effort in communicating this type of offering.

The Centro Region of Portugal adopts a more advanced approach, showcasing a diverse array of tourism experiences on its website<sup>8</sup>. Among these is the "Health and Well-being in Centro de Portugal" initiative, which focuses specifically on thermal tourism. It also features a dedicated website for regional thermal baths, positioning the Centro region as a leading destination in this segment. Additionally, the region features a dedicated website for its regional thermal baths, positioning the Centro as a leading destination in this segment. Since 2021 the region has also hosted the Wellness Weekend<sup>9</sup>, an annual event offering a weekend filled with health and wellness activities. This event ties the region's wellness offerings to regional tourism, further strengthening its image as a destination of choice for those seeking physical and mental balance.

Turismo Lisboa<sup>10</sup> on the other hand, makes minimal reference to health and wellness tourism. The only mention of this topic on its website is the Lisbon Alternative Fair 2023, an event that promotes healthy and alternative lifestyles but lacks a strong emphasis on the tourism sector.

In contrast, Turismo do Algarve<sup>11</sup> takes a more understated approach to promoting health and wellness tourism. Under the "Health and Wellness" section, the region is presented as a destination for stress relief and health revitalisation, with an emphasis on hotels specialising in these areas. Featured experiences include medical tourism, thermal spas, thalassotherapy, and meditation centres, blending holidays with physical and mental rejuvenation.

Termas de Portugal presents a more robust communication strategy. On its website<sup>12</sup>, it promotes a variety of thermal and tourism-related products. The experiences are

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<sup>8</sup> The health and wellness page for the Centro Region of Portugal can be accessed at <https://turismodocentro.pt/saude-e-bem-estar-no-centro-de-portugal>

<sup>9</sup> Information on the Wellness Weekend can be found at <https://turismodocentro.pt/evento/wellness-weekend>

<sup>10</sup> The Turismo Lisboa page is available at [www.visitlisboa.com/pt-pt/eventos/feira-alternativa-de-lisboa23](http://www.visitlisboa.com/pt-pt/eventos/feira-alternativa-de-lisboa23)

<sup>11</sup> The Turismo do Algarve page is accessible at [www.visitalgarve.pt/en/menu/127/health-and-wellness.aspx](http://www.visitalgarve.pt/en/menu/127/health-and-wellness.aspx)

<sup>12</sup> The Termas de Portugal website can be accessed at <https://termasdeportugal.pt/>

organised into themed routes, such as the “Historical Route”, the “Nature Route”, and the “Charm Route”, and include programmes like “Natural Massage” “Natural Legs”, and “Natural Relax”, which combine therapeutic treatments with the exploration of tourist destinations, making the thermal baths an essential part of the wellness experience.

Moreover, the hospitality sector has played a crucial role in developing products focused on health and wellness, offering luxury and exclusive experiences. Among the most prominent examples are H2Otel, New Life in Covilhã, Satsanga Spa at Vila Galé hotels, The Yeatman Wine Spa, Six Senses Spa, Nuxe Spa at Le Monumental Palace, Sheraton Porto Hotel & Spa, and Longevity Wellness Worldwide. These establishments have been pioneers in creating unique offerings, attracting both domestic and international tourists seeking rejuvenation and balance.

In parallel, the World Wellness Weekend Portugal event has been promoting health and wellness in the country since 2021, making these practices accessible to all. This global initiative, present in 150 countries, invites wellness-related establishments to open their doors and offer free activities and workshops during a weekend dedicated to well-being. The movement aims to inspire and empower people to manage their health better, encouraging them to adopt healthier lifestyles.

At the same time, the Direção-Geral da Saúde (Directorate-General of Health, DGS) has played a crucial role in guiding health communication. Through the creation of an updated manual the DGS focuses on promoting health literacy and outlines strategies that marketing and communication professionals should follow to ensure effective messaging. This manual, released after the pandemic, is particularly relevant considering the growing attention to mental health and well-being, serving as an essential resource for addressing the emerging challenges in this field (Melo et al., 2022).

Voigt et al. (2011) identify three segments of wellness tourists: beauty spa users, resort guests, and spiritual retreat participants. This segmentation can be applied to Portugal's wellness tourism offerings, allowing communication strategies to be tailored to different tourist profiles.

The integration of well-being-focused strategies can not only benefit tourists but also contribute to the improvement of the national Well-Being Index, which has shown continuous growth in the quality of life of the Portuguese population in recent years. Data from the IBE, covering the period from 2014 to 2019, indicate positive progress in most assessed areas, particularly in personal safety, education, and economic well-being (INE, 2020). This positive trend was disrupted during the 2020 pandemic, with noticeable declines in health, life expectancy, employment, economic vulnerability, social relationships, and subjective well-being. However, the pandemic also underscored the critical importance of healthcare services, which were among the factors to recover most swiftly. The Well-Being Index in Portugal has continued to evolve positively

between 2004 and 2022, although it registered declines in 2020, the year of the pandemic (INE, 2022).

Health and wellness tourism not only offers opportunities to promote physical and mental well-being but also has the potential to improve key quality of life indicators.

These results underscore the importance of effective and innovative communication in the health and wellness tourism sector, which can position Portugal as a leading destination by promoting experiences that not only attract tourists but also contribute to the overall well-being of the population.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS TOURISM IN PORTUGAL**

This research aimed to clarify the distinctions between the concepts of wellness and well-being, as well as to evaluate the strategic communication of regional tourism entities in Portugal regarding the promotion of health and wellness tourism. The findings provide valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges faced by the sector in conveying these concepts, highlighting areas for improvement in future strategies.

The first research question – “To what extent can the concepts of wellness and well-being be defined, and what are the differences between them?” – revealed that wellness primarily focuses on fostering physical practices and healthy habits, with an emphasis on physical well-being. Well-being adopts a more holistic approach, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and mental dimensions, offering a broader and more comprehensive understanding of an individual's overall health.

The second research question - 'How are regional tourism entities in Portugal communicating the services and products associated with health and wellness?' - demonstrated that, although some regions have made progress in promoting health and wellness tourism, such as the Centro Region with its annual 'Wellness Weekend' event, overall communication in Portugal remains limited, with a disproportionate focus on thermalism. Regions like Porto and the North, for instance, continue to prioritise traditional offerings without fully incorporating the broader concept of well-being. There remains significant untapped potential in health and wellness tourism across the country.

Health and wellness tourism in Portugal plays a crucial role not only in drawing tourists but also in improving the population's quality of life. Data from the Well-Being Index, which shows consistent growth up to 2022 despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, affirms the sector's positive impact on both the economy and societal well-being. The recovery of well-being levels, especially in areas such as personal safety, health and economic stability, reflects the direct contribution of health tourism infrastructure and services.

These improvements, evidenced by growth in nine out of the ten domains of the Well-Being Index, demonstrate that promoting wellness tourism strengthens the local economy and contributes to enhanced quality-of-life indicators. Progress in education, environmental factors, and personal safety further underscores the importance of continued investment in strategies that advance this sector. Portugal, therefore, not only positions itself as a leading destination for health tourism, but also benefits its own population by improving national well-being and quality of life.

### **5.1 Future directions for health and wellness tourism communication**

With the global expansion of wellness tourism, as highlighted by Voigt et al. (2011), Portugal has the potential to position itself as a leading destination by offering a diversified portfolio that integrates physical health with well-being. To enhance Portugal's competitiveness in the global health and wellness tourism market, it is crucial to adopt more innovative communication strategies that align with the expectations of tourists across generations.

Digital platforms are expected to play a pivotal role in this context and should be used more effectively to offer personalised and interactive experiences. Effective market segmentation is essential for delivering tailored messages to distinct tourist profiles, ensuring that communication strategies align with the specific needs and expectations of each segment. Communications that address not only physical wellness, but also well-being are key to attracting a broader, more demanding audience. Establishing strategic partnerships with the health and education sectors represents a critical pathway for developing integrated and differentiated tourism packages that seamlessly combine health treatments with wellness experiences.

For Portugal to strengthen its position as a leading destination for health and wellness tourism, it is essential that regional entities adopt a more comprehensive and sophisticated communication strategy. Moreover, for this approach to be recognised as an asset by public policy decision-makers, it will be crucial to generate scientific evidence demonstrating the health benefits of these practices.

Fostering innovation in communication, along with the development of tourism experiences tailored to evolving market demands, is crucial for reinforcing Portugal's competitive position in this segment.

## **6. METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This study analysed communication strategies in health and wellness tourism in Portugal, primarily through an examination of websites and institutional communications. However, it has not captured the perceptions and experiences of tourists and tourism managers in a comprehensive manner. To address this, further research is required, including semi-structured interviews with tourism officials in Portugal and surveys

directed at tourists. This would enable a more detailed understanding of tourist expectations and the operational strategies of tourism entities.

Expanding the geographical scope of the research will also allow for a comparison of communication strategies in Portugal with those of other international benchmark destinations in health and wellness tourism. While the conclusions of this study are pertinent to the Portuguese context, their extrapolation to other international markets should be approached cautiously, considering the cultural and economic specificities of each destination. Future research could test these findings in different contexts, thereby validating their generalisation within the health and wellness tourism sector.

## 7. BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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