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The role of print media in shaping thermal wellness tourism: comparative analysis of Baden Baden and Orense

Iria Caamaño-Franco ^a, Antonia Pérez-García ^a, Begoña Muño-Sar ^a and Kerstin Bremser ^b

^aDepartment of Sociology, Universidade da Coruña, A Coruña, Spain; ^bFaculty of Business & Law, Department of International Business, Pforzheim University, Pforzheim, Germany

ABSTRACT

We examine the effectiveness of print media in projecting the image of spa tourism in two destinations. Previous COVID-19 research focused on visit intention or strategies to overcome government restrictions. We focus on the projected destination image by examining how print media shapes the perception of thermal wellness tourism. Through a comparative analysis of media coverage (2018–2023), we explore and describe the role of print media in constructing the image of Baden-Baden (Germany) and Ourense (Spain) with a mixed methods approach (content analysis and semi-structured interviews). The results reveal significant differences in media representation. The findings underline the importance of print media in shaping destination image and influencing tourists' expectations, highlighting that media coverage is significantly higher in Ourense ($N=165$) compared to Baden-Baden ($N=74$), with the cultural dimension in Ourense (29.69%), mainly in events, and the educational dimension in Baden-Baden (54.05%). This study contributes to the understanding of public agenda theory in tourism promotion and offers practical ideas for developing tailored communication strategies. It emphasises the need for targeted media narratives that align with destination characteristics and tourist motivations.

KEYWORDS

Thermal Tourism; wellness tourism; destination image; print media

1. Introduction

Thermal tourism, known for its therapeutic and wellness benefits, has been an integral part of European cultures since Roman times. The European Historic Thermal Towns Association (EHTTA) highlights the relevance of thermal heritage as a unique natural and cultural resource, whose history dates back more than 2000 years (Crecente et al., 2018). Although the concept of “spa town” is intrinsically linked to mineral and medicinal resources, which not only offer health benefits but also form an essential part of Europe's cultural and touristic identity (Crecente et al., 2018), the image of thermal destinations

CONTACT Kerstin Bremser  kerstin.bremser@hs-pforzheim.de  Faculty of Business & Law, Department of International Business, Pforzheim University, Tiefenbronner Str. 65, 75175 Pforzheim, Germany

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cannot be separated from their heritage. Therefore, the effective promotion of these destinations through print media should highlight not only the healing qualities of the waters, but also their historical and cultural value.

Currently, thermal tourism is part of a booming sector and its tourism strategy focuses on the effective projection of its identity as places to seek physical, mental and spiritual balance, using natural resources such as thermal waters to improve quality of life and/or lifestyle (Liberato et al., 2021). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, thermal tourism has proven to be a strategic sector in the recovery of global tourism. Due to the therapeutic properties of thermal waters, spas have managed to position themselves as safe and conducive places for physical and emotional recovery (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021).

Of course, tourism promotion of such tourism resources associated with thermalism is an essential task and, in this context, print media have played an important role in the construction of the projected image of the destinations. So, how does print media contribute to the construction of the projected image of thermal destinations? What promotional narrative approaches, based on analytical variables, are managed at the media level in each case, influencing their image? These questions aim to explore the role of print media in shaping the projected image of thermal destinations and the specific promotional narratives employed to influence their perception.

In this context, the Global Wellness Institute (2024) highlights a new need arising from current trends: "Broadening the reach and impact of wellness tourism". This approach highlights the importance of promoting and marketing this practice using clear and accessible language that avoids confusing consumers. Accordingly, print media play a key role in achieving this objective, acting as the main vehicle for the dissemination of accurate information aligned with these goals.

Thus, this paper, through news items, investigates how these media not only inform, but also influence the creation of the projected image of thermal destinations that affects the decisions of potential tourists. The decision to study promotional strategies for thermal destinations through print media was based on its historical and ongoing role in shaping media narratives, particularly in contexts where digital coverage is fragmented or uneven. While it is true that digital media currently dominate the media landscape, print media continues to exert significant influence on specific population segments, particularly local audiences and older demographics, who represent an important market for thermal tourism (Patterson, 2007). A study by Dubois et al. (2021) concludes that print media return more favourable views of a destination and should therefore not be neglected by destination marketing. Thus, analyzing print media allows access to a more stable and reflective narrative compared to the volatility and speed of content on social media. Print media therefore lead to a better understanding and comprehension of the contents compared to digital media (Haddock et al., 2020). This focus also facilitates comparisons between destinations by working with a more uniform and defined textual corpus, as detailed in the methodological section.

Although previous studies have extensively addressed tourism promotion on social media or digital platforms, research on how print media shapes the perception of specific destinations, particularly in the context of thermal tourism, remains limited (with the exception of studies by Hunter, 2010 on the Korean Jeju Island and Crooks et al., 2011 about medical tourism to India). This study aims to address this gap by

offering a comparative analysis of two destinations with contrasting cultural and economic characteristics: Ourense and Baden-Baden.

Over the centuries, destinations such as Baden-Baden in Germany and Ourense in Spain have developed an international reputation thanks to their thermal waters, consolidating themselves as a reference for this type of tourism. This study focuses on these two important European thermal destinations, and analyses how they are promoted in the print media and how this promotion influences the image of the destination. Regarding their differences, this selection also aims to address two contrasting management models (private and public) while considering the fact that these are two destinations with significant cultural contrasts, aspects that enhance the depth of the analysis.

Through a comparative approach, it seeks to understand how the projected image of these destinations varies between different geographical and cultural contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Determinants in the configuration of a spa tourism destination*

The Global Wellness Institute estimates that the wellness market by 2028 will reach almost USD 9 trillion, with a compound annual growth rate of 7.3%. (Global Wellness Institute, 2025). Spa and wellness tourism, along with medical tourism, constitutes an essential sub-category of health tourism, with a primary focus on promoting wellness (Kazakov & Oyner, 2021). This form of tourism has ancient roots, dating back to Roman times, when the curative effects of thermal waters for general health and well-being were recognised (Moss, 2010). Therefore, the motivations that drive tourists to choose thermal destinations, although varying widely, are influenced by a search for benefits related to health, physical and mental well-being, relaxation and improved self-esteem (Liberato et al., 2021; Liberato et al., 2021) as thermal resort offerings have shifted from focusing exclusively on physical healing to offering a combination of traditional medical treatments and new wellness-oriented approaches, such as relaxation therapies, aesthetics and beauty treatments (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021). However, these motivations vary according to the socio-demographic profile of the tourist, which has led thermal destinations to adapt their offer to satisfy different specific market segments (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021). Therefore, the growth of health and wellness tourism offers possibilities for expansion. Thus, companies and destinations should focus on internationalisation, adaptation to new customer segments and integration of complementary activities (Antunes et al., 2009).

This change in supply and demand reflects a transformation in the business model, in the destination and also in the profile of the tourist, who seeks personalised experiences that combine physical healing with emotional well-being (Liberato et al., 2021). In the study by Blanco-Cerradelo et al. (2022), based on the stakeholders' perspective, they conclude that the competitiveness of thermal destinations is determined by the interactions between their determining factors, so that the design of the strategy to improve competitiveness must be based on this interaction. Along these lines, Domingues Mendonça et al. (2021) propose that the integration of new technologies, endowed with intelligence, would contribute to improving competitiveness and stimulate thermal tourism. Carballo-Cruz et al. (2024) indicate that there is a lack of integration between innovation initiatives

and territorial development, which limits the ability of spas to generate competitive advantages. They recommend promoting co-creation with local and regional actors to develop dynamic innovation capacities, as well as focusing innovation not only on products, but also on processes and the sustainability of thermal tourism.

In this context, it is of great importance to mention the fundamental role played by the European Historic Thermal Towns Association (EHTTA), whose main objective is to promote, protect and enhance the thermal, artistic and cultural heritage of European places where mineral and medicinal waters have been fundamental for the development of cities, turning them into agents that generate urbanism, society and heritage (Crecente et al., 2018). Currently, the association has active members (37 members), associate members (13 members) and international members (2 members), and has achieved important milestones, such as certification as a Council of Europe Cultural Itinerary and the creation of the Atlas of Europe's Thermal Heritage (Crecente et al., 2019). Among its most recent achievements is the establishment of 12 October as "Thermal Heritage Day". Cities such as Ourense and Baden-Baden, both active members, enjoy the benefits of membership, promoting spa tourism internationally and supporting projects for the preservation and promotion of their historical and cultural heritage. However, there is a lack of clear and comprehensive data on the quantity, quality and value of thermal resources in Europe, making it difficult to create a competitive and cohesive product (Mainil et al., 2017).

2.2. Destination image generation: a public agenda approach

Since 1972, the tourism image construct has undergone a remarkable evolution, adapting to the emerging dynamics of technology and market trends, without disassociating itself from its essential nature as a complex and subjective mental representation (Sánchez Castellanos, 2022). Considered as a multidimensional and critical concept, tourism image plays a determining role in the perception, evaluation and selection of destinations by visitors (Bigné & Sánchez, 2001; Gallarza et al., 2002; Ispas & Saragea, 2011; Santana Talavera, 2015). This image, whose construction is articulated through the interaction between the representations of the destination and the subjective experiences of tourists, has both a projected and perceived dimension (Antón & González, 2007; MacCannell, 2003). On the one hand, the projected dimension, shaped by marketing strategies and communicative actions, directly influences the choice of destination by potential tourists (Andreu et al., 2000). On the other hand, the perceived dimension emerges from the interaction between these projections and individual perceptions, shaped by external experiences and stimuli (Marine-Roig, 2015). While the perceived image is developed at the individual level, destination managers can actively influence the projected image through the selection of certain types of media or channels. Thus, the tourism image stands as a fundamental element for the competitive positioning of destinations and must be strategically integrated into territorial marketing policies (Sánchez Castellanos, 2022).

In this framework, communication emerges as a fundamental pillar, articulating with personal factors and various sources of information to shape the configuration of the destination's image. This construct, far from being static, is continuously redefined by structured information transmitted through media channels such as advertising and news,

elements that significantly influence consumer decisions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bojanic, 1991; Font, 1997; Gartner, 1994; Um & Crompton, 1990). The variety and type of information sources have a significant effect on the formation of the perceived destination image in the recipients, which is why the strategic management of promotion and marketing (Andrade Suárez, 2012) through the public agenda is considered of utmost importance. Along these lines, changes brought about by external macroeconomic events, such as political transformations, or disease outbreaks (e.g. COVID-19), can generate social conflicts that condition tourism dynamics, making the governance of the media agenda relevant (Dioko, 2024).

In the current context of intense competition between tourist destinations, it is imperative to understand the processes underlying the formation of destination image. In the specific case of thermal destinations, the construction of an effective image requires an in-depth knowledge of visitor expectations and the adaptation of services to these preferences, with the aim of optimising their strategic positioning (Hallmann et al., 2015; Ramos et al., 2021). At the same time, the modernisation of infrastructures and the promotion of activities linked to thermal tourism represent fundamental axes to strengthen the image of the sector (Barbosa et al., 2020). Therefore, the management of the image projected through the media must be meticulous, ensuring that it reflects not only the curative properties of the thermal waters, but also the cultural and scenic attractiveness inherent to these destinations (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021). An essential challenge in this task lies in developing narratives that manage to integrate the history, wellness and uniqueness of the destination, without compromising the authenticity of the natural resources that support it. Increasing the notoriety of the destination brand is directly related to the management of the media agenda, especially from the public sector, where political, media and public agendas converge (Muñiz, 2020).

3. Research methodology

The aim of the research is to carry out a comparative analysis of the public and private promotion of thermal tourism in two different destinations, two geographical contexts which, although equidistant, have elements in common, being the offer of thermal tourism one of its maximum exponents for both destinations. Thus, the selected geographical contexts, as mentioned in the introduction, are Baden-Baden (Germany) and Ourense city (Spain). Both contexts, with their different characteristics, are analysed in more depth in the “Case Study” section.

An exploratory-descriptive research is carried out with a mixed methodology, divided into two phases: in the first phase, a quantitative-qualitative content analysis of news is carried out and in the second phase, the analysis is complemented with in-depth interviews, semi-structured model, with various professionals in the field under study.

These research questions guided both the data collection and analysis processes.

- (1) Content analysis of print media: The questions shaped the selection of articles, focusing on narratives, promotional themes, and key actors involved in the construction of the projected image. Analytical categories such as narrative focus, predominant themes, and stakeholders were applied systematically to media coverage from 2018 to 2023.

- (2) Interviews with key stakeholders: The questions informed the semi-structured interview guide, aiming to explore perceptions of media representation, promotional strategies, and the media's role in shaping destination images. The responses were categorised to identify patterns and discrepancies with the media narratives.

This approach ensured a structured integration of findings, triangulating media content with stakeholders' perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the projected destination image.

3.1. First phase

The news search procedure has been carried out with the FACTIVA(R)1 tool (Factiva, [n.d.](#)). To determine and identify the final news sample, a strategic design of Prisma methodology (Moher et al., 2009) was followed, the aim of this screening methodology being to justify the final news sample with scientific rigour. As can be seen in Figure 1, a search was performed with the keywords "Tourism" and the name of "Baden-Baden"

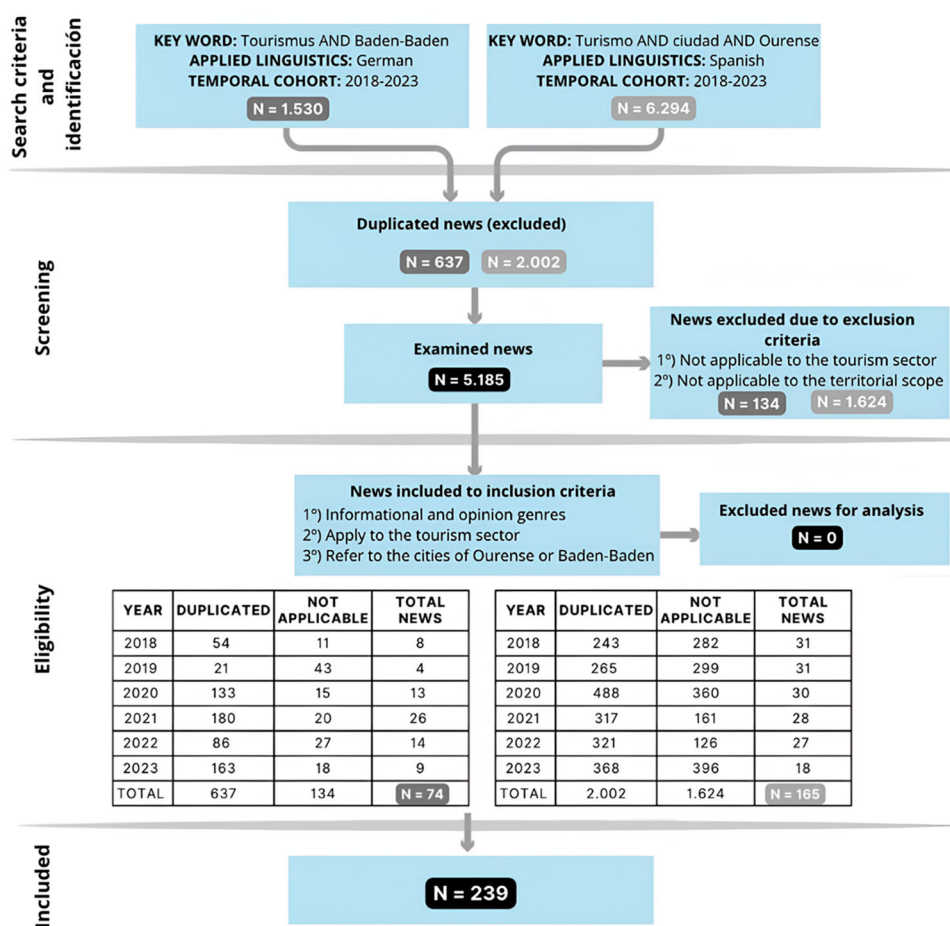


Figure 1. Flowchart on the Prisma process to narrow down the final sample. Source: own-elaboration.

city and “Ourense” city, in their corresponding languages. The initial result also includes news from the EFE and Europa Press agencies. The search time–space cohort has been delimited between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2023, being a total of 6 full years, following a cross-sectional timeline. The decision of the key words follows a convenience sampling, based on the premises: concreteness of the name of the city and the concept “tourism”, and because the latter encompasses a wide diversity of meanings that present a plausible relationship, whether direct or indirect, with thermal tourism.

As mentioned above, and with the intention of purifying the news database under study, obtained through Factiva (Factiva, n.d.) and limiting bias and random error, a series of inclusion and systematic exclusion criteria were established, following the

Table 1. Categorical variables of analysis.

(Nº) VARIABLE	ANALYSIS CRITERION	UNIT OF MESUREMENT	RESULTS OBTAINED
Quantitative variable analysis			
(1) Date of publication	Quantification of coverage	Publication by year and media quantification	Level of importance given by the media according to their distribution over time
(2) Most frequent keywords/themes	Frequency of words used	Text	Exploration of the key words that underlie the different discursive representations generated by the media.
(3) Actors involved	Frequency of presence of each stakeholder, whether public or private institutions	Code: Xunta de Galicia; Deputación de Ourense; Concello de Ourense; EHTTA; Tourismus Baden-Württemberg; Stadtrat Baden-Baden ...	Identification and quantification of the actors involved in the social communication process.
Qualitative textual analysis			
(4) Thematic dimensions and types of frames identified, according to the Public Agenda	Semantic fields, concepts and areas most related to the object of study.	Code: Functional; Social; Economic; Cultural; Educational; Environmental; Political.	Definition of the semantic fields, concepts and areas most related to the object of study. Relationship with the Public Agenda.
(5) Treatment/bias	Identification of the tone of the publication through identification of: • Key words • Qualifiers and adjectives • Use of verbs • Semantic analysis For further classification into: • Positive (+1): Language that highlights benefits, opportunities or positive aspects. • Negative (–1): Language that highlights problems, criticisms or risks. • Neutral (0): Objective language, without explicit judgement.	Code: Negative; Neutral; Positive	Percentage of bias or tendency. Evaluation of the content to see how it may affect the image of the destination.

Source: own-elaboration.

Prisma method (Figure 1). Bearing in mind that press agencies are organisations that have correspondents in all the autonomous communities (in the case of Spain) or federated states (in the case of Germany) and contribute to the national information structure, some of the news items appear duplicated, so the criterion of exclusion of duplicated publications is included, when an exact coincidence is observed in the headline and content. On the other hand, in the case of Ourense, the news items in which the word “tourism” does not apply to the city are also eliminated because it refers to a car or vehicle, referred to the Degree in Tourism taught in Ourense or referred to the Agenda Informativa of other cities, provinces or autonomous communities. In the case of Baden-Baden, those news items that do not refer to the tourism sector in Baden-Baden city do not apply.

As for the content analysis method applied to the final samples of both news items for each destination, a list of quantitative and qualitative categorical variables was initially determined (Table 1). For the textual analysis of the published content, the MAXQDA software was applied, and for the study of sentiment, the MeaningCloud application was used through Microsoft Excel.

3.2. Second phase

In this case, the sample of subjects interviewed was by convenience, with a total of 11 interviews (Table 2). The number of interviews conducted was determined based on the concept of theoretical saturation, which ensures that data collection continues until no new themes, insights, or patterns emerge, providing sufficient depth and comprehensiveness to address the research objectives. The interview guide was designed to be semi-structured, allowing the necessary flexibility to delve deeper into specific topics depending on the profile of the respondents.

This interview model was chosen because it is more flexible and can be adapted to the subject and his/her conditions (Díaz Bravo et al., 2013); from a qualitative approach, this type of interview facilitates the natural expression of the interviewee’s perception and

Table 2. Sample of interviewees.

Code	Interviewee	Sector	Platform	Language	Destination
E.1	Manager medium sized company (equipment for spa and wellness)	Private	In person	German	Baden-Baden
E.2	European Historic Thermal Towns Association	Private	Video call	German	Baden-Baden
E.3	Manager Caracalla Spa	Private	In person	German	Baden-Baden
E.4	Head of online Marketing Baden-Baden	Public	In person	German	Baden-Baden
E.5	Architect for Spa Buildings	Private	Video call	German	Baden-Baden
E.6	Responsible for the Wholesale Travel Agency Groups department	Private	In person	Spanish	Ourense
E.7	Senior position at “Axencia de Turismo de Galicia”	Public	In person	Spanish	Ourense
E.8	Consultant and expert in Thermalism	Private	In person	Spanish	Ourense
E.9	Tourism Technician at the Carballo City Council	Public	In person	Spanish	Ourense
E.10	Senior executive in charge of the thermal sector at Tourism in Ourense	Public	In person	Spanish	Ourense
E.11	Correspondent for Caldaria Group	Private	In person	Spanish	Ourense

Source: own-elaboration.

allows the interviewees to deviate from the topic to focus on those issues important to him/her (Al Balushi, 2016).

Given the fact that Baden-Baden is dominated by private sector investment and Ourense by public investment, our selection of interview partners reflected this fact.

The following sections were part of the interview guide, which was standardised across both destinations and all respondent profiles: the role of print media in promoting thermal destinations, key elements for constructing a positive destination image, differences in communication strategies between destinations and challenges in the media promotion of thermal destination. This approach ensured consistency in the data collection process while allowing flexibility to explore specific themes as they arose. The questions aimed to capture diverse perspectives on the role of print media and the challenges and strategies associated with the promotion of thermal destinations.

4. Case of study: geographical context and thermal offerings for both cities

The city of Baden-Baden is part of the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. It lies in the valley of the river Oos, on the outskirts of the Black Forest. Baden-Baden was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as a Major European Spa in 2021 (UNESCO, 2021).

The city of Ourense is located in the province of Ourense, being one of the four provinces of the Autonomous Community of Galicia. Ourense is known as the City of the Burgas due to its famous thermal waters and its origins dating back to Roman times (Figure 2).

The thermal offer of Baden-Baden and Ourense totals five thermal baths and one thermal pool. Baden-Baden has two private thermal baths and Ourense has four thermal baths and one thermal pool, all of them public (Table 3).

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Thermal tourism in the written press

5.1.1. Quantification of information coverage by year and medium

The promotion of thermal destinations through print media is not only a channel to inform about the services and characteristics of these destinations, but also plays a crucial role in the construction and positioning of their image. Against this background, it is of interest to explore the evolution of the coverage of thermal tourism in the cities of Ourense and Baden-Baden over the study period (2018–2023). Based on the available data, it can be determined that the level of importance given by the media to these spa destinations is unevenly distributed over time. In the case of Ourense, the trend is decreasing, although the distribution of news is maintained throughout the period, but Baden-Baden, presents a more irregular distribution, highlighting the peak of news in 2021 when it became a world heritage site (Figure 3).

The distribution of news reflects the fact that it is not a widely consolidated topic on the agenda of these media and, therefore, in the collective imagination of their respective audiences. However, a greater media relevance is observed at times when specific events



Figure 2. European location of Baden-Baden and the city of Ourense. Source: own-elaboration based on Q-GIS.

Table 3. Inventory of thermal baths in Baden-Baden and Ourense.

Name		Management	City
Caracalla Thermal Baths	Private		Baden-Baden
Friedrichsbad Thermal Baths	Private		Baden-Baden
Outariz and Burga de Canedo Thermal Baths	Public		Ourense
A Chavasqueira Thermal Baths	Public. Closed due to fire damage in 2019.		Ourense
Muiño da Veiga Thermal Baths	Public		Ourense
As Burgas Thermal Baths	Public. Closed for renovation to comply with the Galician Thermal Waters Regulation Law		Ourense

Source: Baden-Baden Tourism (<https://www.baden-baden.com/wellness>) (Turismo de Baden-Baden, 2024) and Ourense Tourism: “Ourense capital termal” (<https://www.turismodeourense.gal/termalismo/termas-de-ourense/>) (Turismo de Ourense “Ourense capital termal”, 2024)

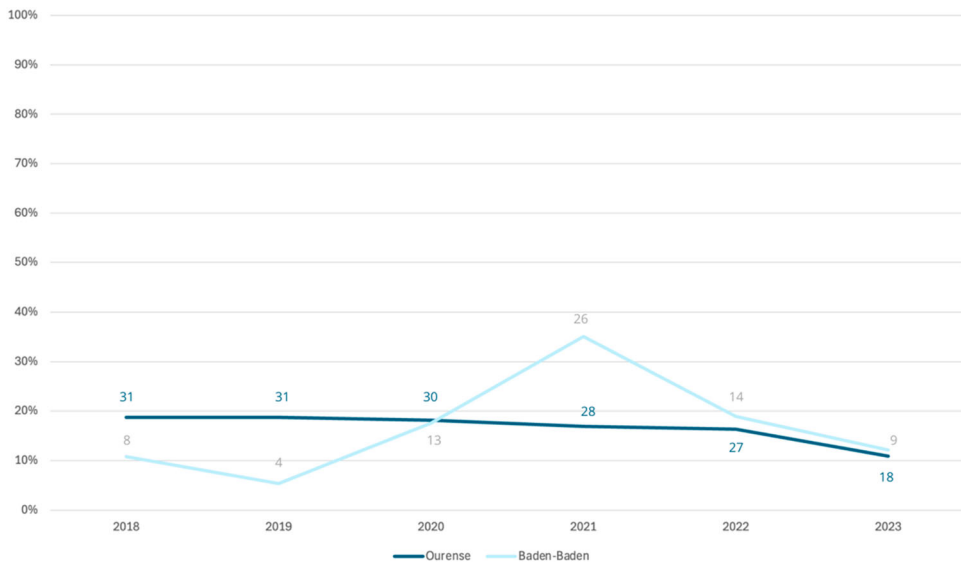


Figure 3. Media distribution of thermal tourism in Ourense and Baden-Baden. Source: own elaboration based in Factiva news.

are presented, whether they are events of interest related to thermalism or media cases related to thermal baths. Likewise, it is important to highlight a palpable evidence, which is that Ourense has more media presence (169 news items, equivalent to 69.03% of the total), compared to Baden-Baden (74 news items, i.e. 30.96%).

As for the media coverage of thermal tourism, there is a notable difference between the two cities. In Ourense, more than 50% of the news related to the thermal sector are published by the newspaper Faro de Vigo (56.36%), which indicates a clear concentration of information in this medium. On the other hand, in Baden-Baden, the dissemination of news on spa tourism is more diversified among several media. The newspaper Schwarzwälder Bote reports the highest percentage of news with 9.45%, closely followed by other media such as Südwest Presse and Welt, both with 8.10% (Figure 4). The fact that one and the same source reports on the subject of spa tourism makes it easier for the

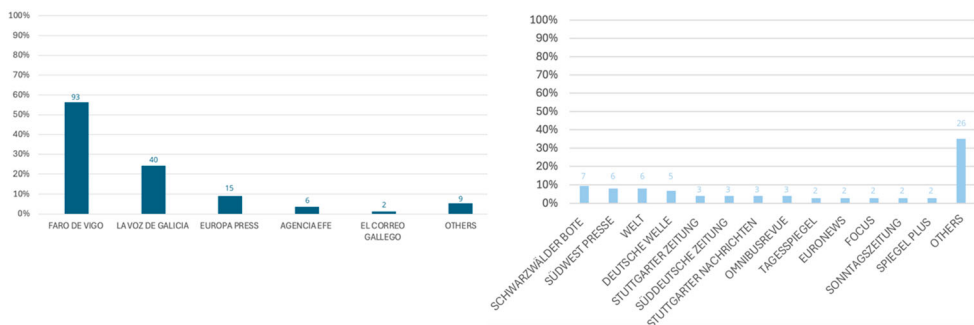


Figure 4. Media coverage. *The category "other" includes all newspapers with 1 news item. Source: own-elaboration.

target audience to access the information. It is also interesting to note that Schwarzwälder Bote and Südwest Presse are regional, while WELT and Deutsche Welle are national newspapers/radio stations.

5.1.2. Keyword research

For the analysis of the keywords, several exhaustive readings were carried out in order to identify the most relevant terms both in the headlines and in the body of the texts. Once the results were obtained, up to a maximum of five keywords per news item were selected, which allowed us to obtain a total of 213 words for Ourense city and 108 for Baden-Baden.

In the case of Ourense, the most repeated terms are “thermalism” ($N = 56$) and “thermal tourism” ($N = 19$), underlining the relevance of this sector for the city (Figure 5). Moreover, terms such as “reopening” ($N = 38$), “closure of thermal baths” ($N = 19$) or “Covid”19 measures’ ($N = 17$) are linked to the social and political demands of the de-escalation and post-pandemic, highlighting the pressure from opposition parties, tourists and the local population for the reopening of the public thermal baths, which remained closed, considered in many of the published opinions, for an “excessive amount of time”. The “Ley de Aprovechamiento Lúdico de las Aguas Termales de Galicia” ($N = 15$) appears as a key factor, since, from the local authorities, such as the Xunta de Galicia and the Concello de Ourense, it is indicated that the non-compliance with this law is one of the main reasons for not reopening the thermal baths. Undoubtedly, in Spain, the COVID-19 crisis has been used to highlight the role of spas as agents of health, promoting public-private partnerships that have allowed the reactivation of the sector. Initiatives such as “Solidarity Thermalism” in the province of Ourense have shown the potential of spas to contribute to the well-being not only of tourists, but also of essential workers (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021).

Another relevant aspect is the term “thermal event” ($N = 38$), highlighting “Termatalia” ($N = 35$) as an event of great importance for “promotion” ($N = 25$) as it is a consolidated international fair held annually in the city. The EHTTA (European Historic Thermal Towns Association) ($N = 16$), is another prominent actor, reflecting its role in thermal events in the region. Finally, some of the most repeated key terms correspond to the proper names of the thermal baths, such as “A Chavasqueira” ($N = 34$), related to its reopening and the fire suffered in 2019, “As Burgas” ($N = 26$) and “Outariz” ($N = 25$). In many cases, reference is made to the “Río Miño” ($N = 19$), mainly linked to the floods that have affected the thermal baths, causing considerable damage.

In the analysis of news related to Germany, the focus on thermalism is less pronounced compared to Ourense, as the attention is more focused on the “Black Forest” region ($N = 30$) as a territory of great natural and cultural value (Figure 5). The media highlight geographical aspects such as “Baden-Württemberg” ($N = 15$) and its “nature” ($N = 12$), the “mountain” ($N = 11$) and the “forest” ($N = 8$), reflecting a clear promotion of the destination as a tourist destination based on the natural environment. This is also evident in the promotion of outdoor activities, such as “cycling” ($N = 9$) and “hiking” ($N = 8$), which are highly promoted by the media.

In terms of spa tourism, Baden-Baden is presented as a “spa town” ($N = 22$), sometimes highlighted as part of the “Great Spa Towns of Europe” ($N = 8$), where its rich “history” ($N = 15$) is narrated from its beginnings. In fact, since 2021 Baden-Baden was declared a “UNESCO” World Heritage Site ($N = 16$) (UNESCO, 2021), which reinforces its importance

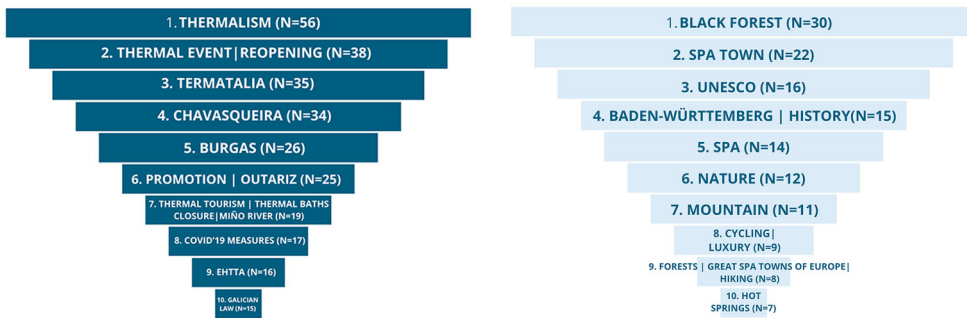


Figure 5. Top 10 most cited keywords in the news from Ourense and Baden-Baden. Source: own-elaboration.

as an internationally renowned destination. In this context, its main tourist resources, such as the “spas” ($N = 14$) and the famous casino, are frequently mentioned, elements that underline Baden-Baden’s association with “luxury” ($N = 9$) and the upper classes. In other words, media coverage not only highlights its thermal resources, but also its historical, cultural and high-end value, which positions it as a benchmark for luxury and wellness tourism in Europe.

As highlighted above, the analysis reveals a strong interrelation between socio-political, environmental and tourism promotion aspects, all of which are fundamental to understand the dynamics of thermalism in the city and the current concerns of its inhabitants and authorities. Ultimately, the image constructed through media and tourism promotion conditions the perception of the destination, creating stereotypes that will influence the profile of tourism demand (Escudero, 2018).

5.1.3. Identification of the actors involved in the thermal tourism media communication process

Media communication in the field of tourism emerges as a complex and dynamic process, the result of the interaction between multiple actors, including public bodies, private companies, the media and tourists themselves, who, as prosumers, generate and distribute content that influences the perception of destinations. This web of relationships not only shapes the tourism narrative, but also acts as a mediator in the interpretation of the attributes of a destination by the different target audiences. In this sense, the correlation between urban image and destination image highlights the imperative need to implement comprehensive territorial marketing strategies that integrate both public and private actors in a collaborative effort. Such strategies not only strengthen message cohesion, but also enhance the positioning of health and spa tourism destinations in highly competitive markets (Biçer et al., 2018). Thus, according to Zhang and Jing (2023), the media play a crucial role in this process by setting the agenda and defining priorities in the construction and dissemination of destination images, as well as generating credibility and trust with messages that are well differentiated from advertising (González Santos et al., 2014).

Therefore, identifying the key actors involved in media communication is essential to optimise promotional strategies. The results obtained from the study of the main social

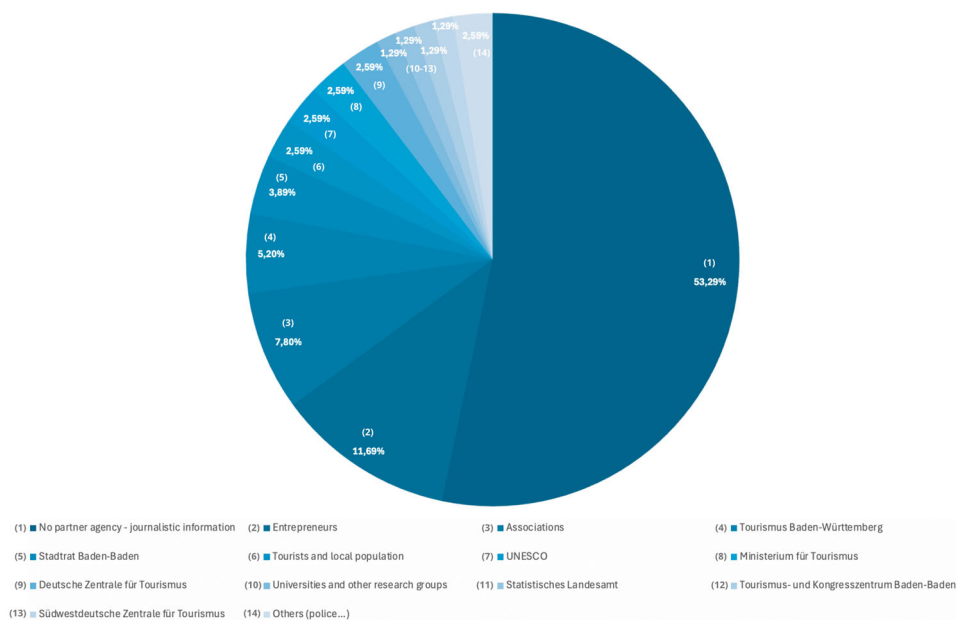


Figure 6. Social actors in the Baden-Baden news. Source: own-elaboration.

actors involved in the journalistic narrative on thermal tourism in Ourense and Baden-Baden are presented below (Figures 6 and 7). As can be deduced, on numerous occasions more than one actor is involved, especially when referring to the public sphere. However, there are also purely informative news items that do not cite any related body or entity, limiting themselves to an aseptic description of the facts, a phenomenon that is more frequent in Baden-Baden. The analysis reveals a marked difference in the informative dynamics between Ourense and Baden-Baden. In Ourense, an institutional approach predominates in the media discourse, with a notable presence of public entities such as the City Council and the Deputation of Ourense, which occupy a central role in the news related to thermal tourism. In contrast, in Baden-Baden, the news tends to adopt a more general and descriptive approach, oriented towards the city itself, its historical heritage and its tourist resources, without a prominent reference to specific actors. Associations and entrepreneurs have some relevance in the discourse, but public institutions generate a smaller amount of news compared to Ourense. This contrast suggests that while Ourense projects an institutional and public management image in the promotion of its thermal destination, Baden-Baden focuses on enhancing its historical and heritage legacy as distinctive elements of its tourism offer.

5.1.4. Thematic dimensions projected on thermal tourism

After the analysis, a categorisation of the news items was carried out using the MAXQDA programme, taking into account the thematic similarities and grouping them together. Figure 8 summarises the seven thematic dimensions that structure the analysed news items on thermal tourism in Ourense City (OC) and Baden-Baden (BB), broken down by percentages indicating their relevance in each city and the total number of news items.

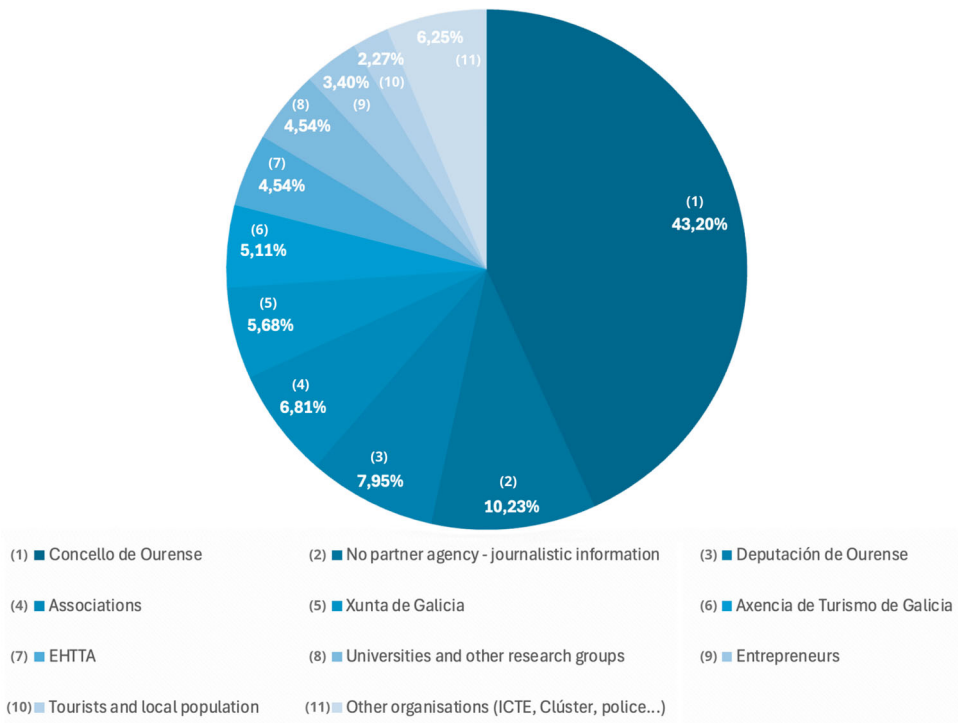


Figure 7. Social actors in the Ourense news. Source: own-elaboration.

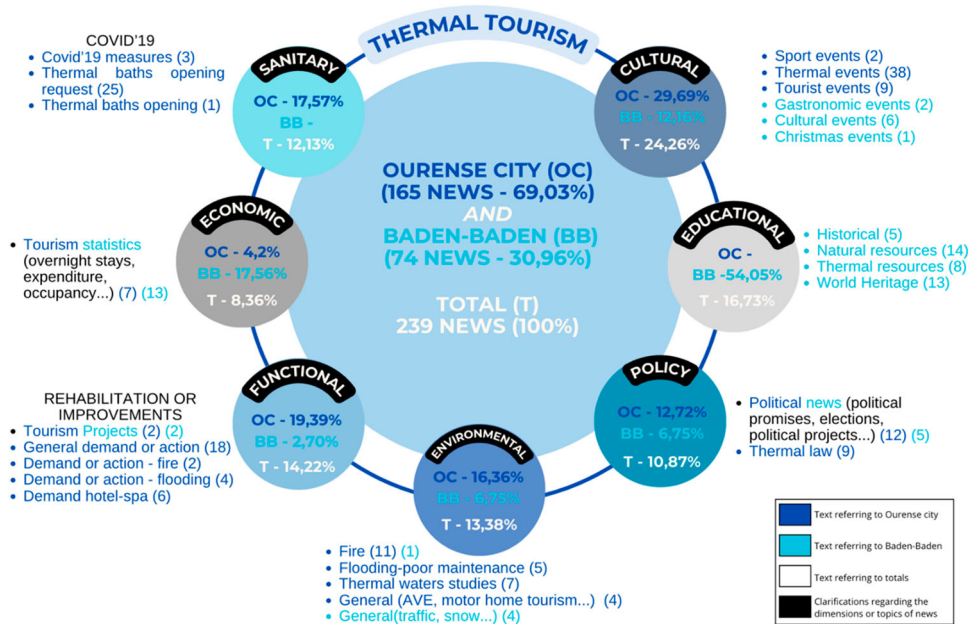


Figure 8. Thematic dimensions of thermal tourism in the print media. Source: own-elaboration.

In the following, each of them is explained, incorporating the results obtained in the interviews, so as to complete the explanation with additional information from the people involved.

First, the cultural dimension is the most relevant in the total number of news items (24.26%), with a significant predominance in Ourense (29.69%) compared to Baden-Baden (12.16%). This indicates that in Ourense the story on thermal tourism is strongly associated with sporting and trade fair events (mainly Termatalia and Fitur), which may be linked to the active promotion of activities related to thermalism. On this dimension, E.2. indicates that “visitors combine health, wellness and cultural exploration in spa towns and that the main segments are adults and families looking for leisure and history”. In fact, “marketing combines wellness with culture, targeting affluent individual travellers to avoid mass tourism”, says E.4. To this, E.8. adds “there is a significant opportunity in positioning spas for health tourism beyond traditional markets’.

Secondly, to the educational dimension, Baden-Baden dominates this category (54.05%), while in Ourense it is non-existent. 16.73% of the total number of news items deal with educational aspects related to natural, thermal and heritage resources. This suggests a focus more oriented towards the dissemination of knowledge about the historical and environmental value of Baden-Baden, in contrast to Ourense. In the case of Galicia, however, it seems that the dissemination domain is important as E.7. notes that it “takes advantage of its water resources and regional educational programmes to position itself as a health and wellness destination”.

Thirdly, in the functional dimension, Ourense presents a significant percentage (19.39%), while Baden-Baden only reaches 2.70%, which translates into 14.22% of the total. This reflects that, in Ourense, news about thermalism often include social demands or actions related to infrastructure, rehabilitation of facilities or improvements in the tourism sector. In fact, E.10 indicates that “free access thermal baths are essential to Ourense’s identity, but face challenges of reopening due to limited regulations and resources’. In this sense, E.5. adds that the need to design spaces that incorporate nature and fresh air is emphasised.

In fourth place, the health dimension, strikingly only has a presence in Ourense (17.57%). In total, 12.13% of the news items deal with health-related issues, prevention measures against COVID-19 and the reopening of thermal baths, which in Ourense have been a central issue after the pandemic. In this line, E.4. indicates that during this period “the campaigns of the Baden-Baden destination emphasised safety and exclusivity”. Furthermore, this period was used to “plan future expansions (E.1.) to which E.3. adds that it “emphasised the importance of designing customised experiences and flexible operations”. Therefore, according to E.9. it is necessary to “work on health-centric narratives in spa destinations’.

In fifth place, continuing with the political dimension, both in Ourense (12.72%) and Baden-Baden (6.75%), the political dimension has a moderate presence, representing 10.87% of the total. This includes news about electoral promises, political projects and thermal legislation, with Ourense standing out for the aforementioned legislation. In this sense, it should be clarified that according to the interviewees, regulation varies widely depending on the region. In fact, E.5. indicates that countries such as Switzerland and Germany have stricter standards, which requires a thorough knowledge of local regulations to ensure compliance. At this point it is also interesting to mention the social

thermalism programme of the Provincial Council and similar programmes promoted by the Xunta de Galicia. As stated by E.11 “these programmes promote access to thermalism for the over 50s and vulnerable groups, integrating cultural activities’.

Sixth, in terms of the economic dimension, Baden-Baden reflects a higher percentage (17.56%) than Ourense (4.2%). In total, this dimension occupies 8.36% of the news, suggesting that in Baden-Baden, thermal tourism gives greater importance to aspects such as tourism statistics, such as income generated and/or hotel occupancy. E.1. mentions that “a generational shift is observed: Millennials and Generation Z prefer group and social experiences rather than traditional individual treatments’ although, it points out, “spa users vary significantly according to culture and demographics’. As for the destinations, both are very different and while Baden-Baden stands out in quality and exclusivity (E.4.), Ourense is dominated by a senior profile and groups of public programmes such as IMSERSO (E.6.). Therefore, challenges for the Spanish destination include balancing public dependency (IMSERSO) and attracting a more diverse demographic (E.7.; E.8.).

In seventh and last place, the environmental dimension, which is relevant in both cities, being more significant in Ourense (16.36%) compared to Baden-Baden (6.75%). This dimension, with 13.38% of the total, focuses on issues such as fires, floods and studies of thermal waters, reflecting environmental concerns and their effects on thermal facilities. In fact, E.11 insists that its Spanish hotel chain “is committed to sustainability through the installation of solar panels, eco-boats and electric charging stations for vehicles, integrating these practices into its offer”. In the case of the German destination E.2. indicates that “recovery from the pandemic included outdoor activities, such as hiking, and wellness programmes for prolonged COVID-19 symptoms”.

Therefore, it can be concluded that notable differences are revealed in how thermal tourism is portrayed in the media of both cities. In Ourense, cultural, functional and health aspects are prioritised, whereas in Baden-Baden, educational and economic dimensions are more relevant. This points to differentiated approaches in the promotion and management of spa tourism in each context. All in all, the main ideas are synthesised in [Figure 9](#) below:

5.1.5. Positive-negative-neutral tone/bias analysis

Sentiment analysis comprises five main stages (El-Masri et al., 2017): data collection, pre-processing, feature extraction, application of the sentiment analysis algorithm and evaluation of the results.

For the present analysis, it was decided to use the MeaningCloud tool, as described in the methodology. In this way, it has been possible to identify the positive, negative and neutral polarity, in this case, of the headline of the news item. Thus, in Ourense, 53.93% ($n = 89$) of the news items are neutral, while there is a tendency towards negativity with 38.78% ($n = 64$), followed by positive news items with 7.27% ($n = 12$). In contrast, in Baden-Baden 55.40% ($n = 41$) are neutral, but with a tendency towards positivity with 24.32% ($n = 18$), followed by negative news with 20.27% ($n = 15$) ([Figure 10](#)).

As for the bias of the journalistic texts analysed, thermal tourism is treated by the press in a neutral way, in Ourense with a negative tendency, echoing critical voices that, during and after COVID-19, wanted the opening of the public thermal baths. In this context, this was also reaffirmed by the agents in the interviews, as they highlighted that in economic terms, once the opening of these thermal baths was legally permitted, but with limitations,

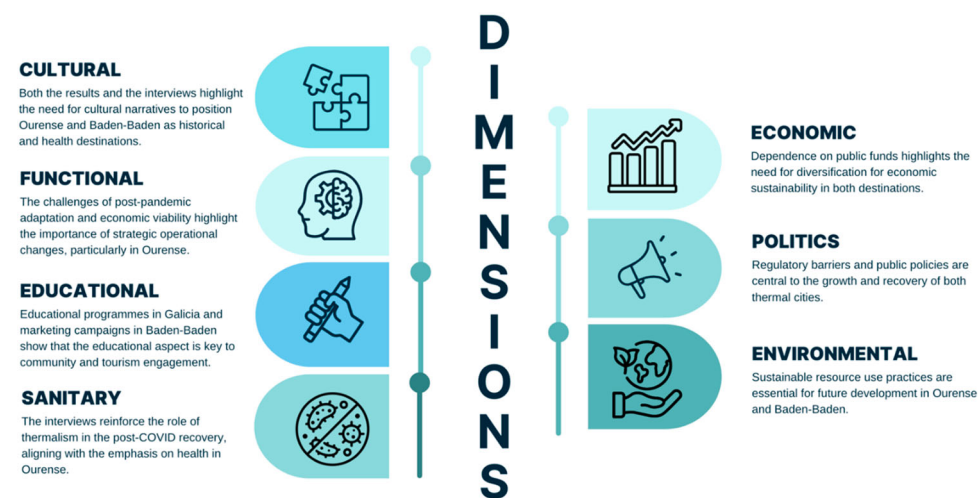


Figure 9. Graphical summary of the dimensions analysed. Source: own-elaboration.

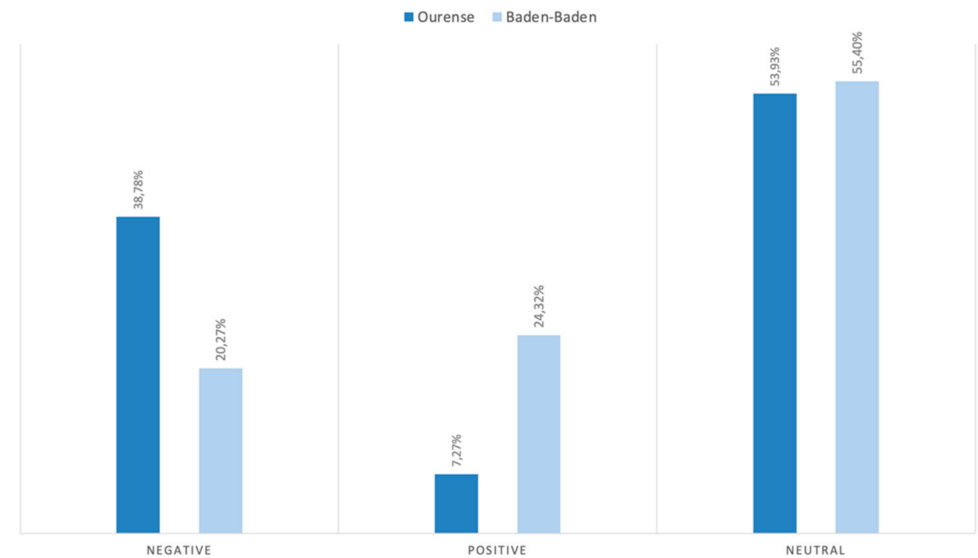


Figure 10. Headline sentiment analysis. Source: own-elaboration.

“it was difficult to maintain open infrastructures such as these if there is no mobility of clients” (E.11), which is why many of them remained closed, highlighting that they were one of the sectors most affected “by the regulations and the type of public” (E.8). In the case of Baden-Baden, the positive trend focuses on the promotion of the destination through its luxury natural resources.

5.2. Trends and challenges for thermal tourism

The spa tourism sector in the cities of Ourense and Baden-Baden faces a complex situation. As shown in Figure 11, stakeholders identify several transformative trends driving

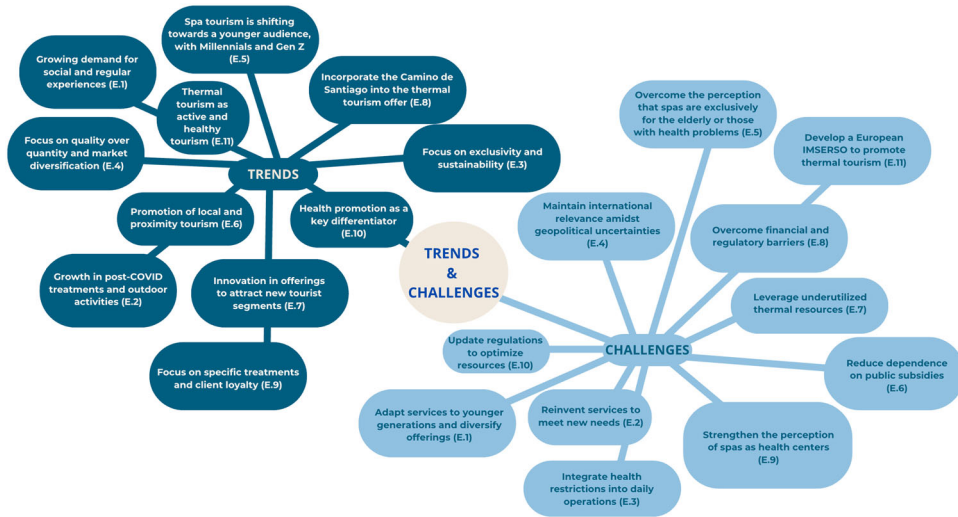


Figure 11. Trends and challenges for thermal tourism in Ourense and Baden-Baden. Source: own-elaboration.

the growth of the sector. These include a growing demand for innovative, personalised, and health-focused experiences, which are increasingly appealing to younger audiences such as millennials and Generation Z. Trends such as the incorporation of local cultural and historical elements, exemplified by Ourense's integration of the Camino de Santiago into thermal tourism, further underscore the importance of tailoring offerings to resonate with diverse tourist profiles. At the same time, stakeholders emphasise sustainability and exclusivity as critical dimensions of future development. While Baden-Baden focuses on high-value luxury offerings, Ourense leans toward accessibility and cultural enrichment. Both approaches highlight the role of health promotion as a defining theme for thermal destinations, aligning with global trends in wellness tourism and the growing preference for holistic well-being.

However, these promising trends are counterbalanced by significant challenges that threaten to hinder progress. Regulatory restrictions, often inconsistent or outdated, present barriers to modernising facilities and integrating innovative services. Financial constraints, particularly in regions dependent on public subsidies or struggling with economic disparities, exacerbate operational inefficiencies. Furthermore, the perception of thermal spas as facilities catering predominantly to older demographics or for therapeutic rather than leisure purposes remains a persistent issue, limiting their appeal to broader markets.

Addressing the challenges in the spa tourism sector requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach, focusing on regulatory reforms, infrastructure investment, and targeted marketing to reposition thermal spas as multi-generational destinations. Leveraging natural resources, diversifying services, and involving local communities can foster a sustainable and inclusive tourism model. Ultimately, balancing tradition with innovation, exclusivity with accessibility, and growth with sustainability is essential for maintaining competitiveness in a global market.

6. Conclusions and implications for practice and research

The study highlights the relevance of print media in the construction of the projected image of spa destinations. The differences between Ourense (cultural and accessible narrative) and Baden-Baden (luxury and exclusivity) underline the need to align the media discourse with the destination's identity.

The comparative analysis of the informational dimensions of thermal tourism in Ourense and Baden-Baden reveals clear differences in the approaches and priorities of each destination. On the one hand, in Ourense, the media narrative gives pre-eminence to the cultural, functional and health dimensions, which suggests a link between thermal tourism and aspects of community well-being and accessibility, where public institutions play a significant role. On the other hand, Baden-Baden is distinguished by the preponderance of the educational and economic dimensions in the media coverage, which shows an interest in the dissemination of the historical and environmental value of the destination, while the emphasis on the economic dimension, reflected in data on income and occupancy, denotes an orientation towards the financial valorisation and economic sustainability of thermal tourism. This suggests a focus on the international positioning of Baden-Baden as a destination of luxury and exclusivity. Overall, the disparities in the media priorities of the two destinations reveal differentiated models of promotion and management of spa tourism. It is evident from our research that a city dominated by private investment and privately held spas (Baden-Baden) promotes itself differently than a city dominated by publicly held spas. The interviews confirm the relevance of aspects such as health, sustainability and diversification in spa tourism, highlighting challenges such as regulatory restrictions and dependence on public programmes.

6.1. Practical implications

DMO's can learn from both cases. They reinforce the importance of well-targeted territorial marketing strategies to build and maintain a competitive image. While Ourense uses institutional communication to position itself as an inclusive and community-based destination, Baden-Baden focuses on attracting a more elite segment. Spa cities that receive their main income from public sector customers should follow the example of Ourense and reach out via institutional channels. Managers have to research well their specific customer segment and highlight those attractions that matter most to their customers. Destinations that rely mainly on private paying customers have to address the variety of their offer to this exclusive segment in order to stay attractive. Here, it helps to offer additional facilities as e. g. opera house, theater, festivals, etc. Marketing campaigns will benefit from the close collaboration of public and private stakeholders (as in the case of Baden-Baden where the city marketing is publicly held and the spas are privately owned).

These strategies highlight how the tourism image is fundamental to differentiate and adapt to the dynamics of the global market. These divergences reflect not only the cultural and strategic particularities of each city, but also the way in which the relationship between media and local actors is articulated in the construction of the tourism image.

The future of innovation in thermal tourism lies in balancing modernisation with cultural preservation, integrating sustainability and responding to evolving consumer demands. Addressing constraints such as regulatory complexities, the incorporation of new smart technologies and staff shortages will require coordinated efforts among key players and a commitment to long-term competitive research and development. This approach will position thermal tourism as a model for sustainable, community-centred tourism development.

6.2. Implications for research

This research has highlighted the importance of print media in shaping the projected image of spa destinations, showing how differentiated narratives, such as the cultural and accessible emphasis in Ourense versus the luxury and exclusivity in Baden-Baden, are key to attracting different markets. Even in an ever-changing world with social media becoming more and more important, print media is still effectively being used for image promotion. In this sense, future research should explore the impact of social networks and digital media on tourism image formation. Here, it is of special interest to also look at the role of user-generated content in shaping destination image formation. It is also imperative to examine how the implementation of sustainable practices, smart technologies and territorial innovation approaches can strengthen the resilience and competitiveness of thermal destinations.

6.3. Limitations

Our research is also subject to limitations. We rely on print media in a context dominated by digital platforms that address younger generations. Future research should rely on integrated analysis of all media channels, including social media. In addition, due to the geographic disparities of the study cases, generalisability of the findings is limited. Also, the research relies on a limited time frame of 4 years which was disrupted by Covid-19. More longitudinal data is needed to analyse how destination image evolves over time and how it aligns with changing tourists' perception post visit.

Ethics declaration

All interviews have been conducted observing the rules of the European General Data Protection Regulation and gave their consent to publication. According to the general recommendations of the author's university, this does not require a separate ethics approval.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Iria Caamaño Franco holds a PhD in Tourism from the University of A Coruña (UDC), Spain. She is a faculty member in the Department of Sociology at the same university, where she teaches undergraduate and master's courses. Her main research interests focus on the impact and role of tourism in local development, approached from a comprehensive perspective. Since 2014, she has been a member of the Territorial Studies Research Group. In 2018, she became the Director of the ROTUR Journal of Leisure and Tourism and also leads the UDC Summer Tourism Course. Her academic work integrates teaching, research and management, positioning her as a key figure in advancing tourism studies and their practical applications to promote sustainable and strategic local development.

Antonia Pérez-García holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of A Coruña (UDC), Spain, where she works in the Department of Sociology of Tourism. Her teaching centres on undergraduate courses in tourism. Since 2019, she has been a member of the Territorial Studies Group and Academic Editor of the ROTUR Journal for Leisure and Tourism. Her main lines of research, from a sociological perspective, focus on tourism, local development and communication.

Begoña Muíño-Sar is a PhD student in Social and Behavioural Sciences at the "Universidade da Coruña" (UDC), Spain. She holds a degree in Tourism from the UDC, as well as a Master's degree in Planning and Management of Tourism Destinations and Products from the same university. Begoña Muíño has given several lectures and conferences as part of her PhD. She has also carried out several research projects related to smart management and planning in the tourism sector and the role of tourism observatories in real-time data monitoring.

Kerstin Bremser has been Professor of International Business at Pforzheim University, Germany since 2008. Ms. Bremser holds a degree from the University of Bamberg, Germany and a PhD from St. Gallen University in Switzerland. Kerstin Bremser has been involved in teaching in cross-cultural communication and international entrepreneurship in undergraduate and master's courses and tutored PhD students. Her research interests relate to crisis management, threats from wildlife danger and strategic issues in the tourism industry. She has published in several renowned international journals and taught at a number of international universities.

ORCID

Iria Caamaño-Franco  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7983-8620>

Antonia Pérez-García  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4655-8830>

Begoña Muíño-Sar  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-3710-9842>

Kerstin Bremser  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8263-7763>

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