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Visit and Management of Historic Gardens during COVID-19 from the Owners/Managers Perspective: Portugal as a Case Study

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Abstract: Gardens around the world, including in Portugal, were enjoying a growth in visitor numbers before the COVID-19 pandemic. The closing of the gates was followed by an immediate fall in visitor numbers and consequent loss of income. However, this disruptive period also acted as a challenge and an opportunity for tourist attractions such as gardens to adapt and reinvent themselves in the wake of new demands imposed by COVID-19, aiming to restore the trust of visitors and maintain or increase the public's engagement with gardens and consequently maintain its sustainability. Taking this framework into account, the purpose of this study is to ascertain the impact of the pandemic on visiting and managing gardens, especially in terms of the precautions applied when they reopened and the measures taken to keep them functioning and reaching people during this period. To accomplish this, a literature review has been carried out and a survey questionnaire subsequently applied to the managers or owners of a selected group of Portuguese historic gardens regarded as major tourist attractions. The findings show that a drop in visitors and income were the immediate and the main negative impacts, having both negative and positive consequences for the maintenance of spaces. Gardens were also able to adapt and continue to function under adverse conditions as well as to incorporate safety requirements in their reopening periods. However, not all gardens responded in the same way to the challenges posed by the pandemic with regard to their relationship with the public. Two groups of gardens were recognized: one that remained passive and took no relevant actions in this period, and another more pro-active group that implemented or reinforced strategies to encourage visits both physical and virtual, and to strengthen their connection with the public, particularly in the digital domain. Respondents also note that they recorded a positive response from the public, specifically local residents. The vast majority agree that gardens became popular places immediately after the lockdown periods; future studies on garden visitors could consolidate this finding. In the post-COVID period, the gardens' challenge is to maintain or improve their connection and interaction with audiences achieved during the pandemic, especially the national and local communities.



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1. Introduction

Historic gardens are the result of the combined forces of man and nature; as such, they are considered one of the richest expressions of cultural and landscape heritage. Like cultural and historical documents, they contain values such as memory, identity, belonging to and understanding of localities and societies [1,2], in addition to providing many environmental, economic and socio-cultural benefits, giving them an intrinsic value expressed in their notable attractiveness [1].

In the last two decades, and particularly before the outbreak of COVID-19, gardens in Portugal and around the world have been experiencing an unprecedented growth in

visitor numbers. This is thanks to their reputation and popularity, aided not only by the abundance and diversity of gardens, but also by their physical and historical qualities and the growing interest shown in them by society, which have helped to establish and consolidate them as tourist attractions [1,3,4]. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Benfield [3] referred to visitor numbers of around 300 million at gardens around the world, public and private. Two decades later, the same author [4] reported a figure of around 1 billion visitors.

The ways in which the various aspects of cultural landscapes are interpreted and managed are vital to their sustainability. Because of their dynamic nature, gardens are fragile and require continuous care and resources to survive. Management is therefore considered a key part of their conservation [5]. This is particularly vital at time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is widely acknowledged that the pandemic caused profound changes in various facets of life, whether work, social and daily life, or leisure and tourism. Leisure and tourism were among the first and most severely affected areas by COVID-19, with immediate impacts felt from the worldwide to the local scale, especially in regions heavily dependent on tourism, because of border closures and restrictions on internal mobility [6–9]. The result has been a massive drop in international tourism in all regions of the globe [10].

The lack of knowledge and unpredictability that characterized the pandemic initially cast the spotlight mainly on its most negative effects. However, tourism services were obliged to find a prompt response to the event, which was quickly seen as a turning point in various fields, and an opportunity for the recreational/tourism activity, in all its dimensions, to adapt and reinvent itself in light of the new demands that COVID-19 imposed on human behavior and life in society. During the pandemic period, measures and strategies were adopted to somehow keep sites and events close to the public and maintain their sustainability. This is the context in which digitalization, for example, gained ground, with COVID-19 acting as a catalyst for the process, and in which digital technologies enabled not only a reformulation of the offer but also a reinterpretation of experiences [11].

Gardens as tourist attractions were no exception: the impact of the pandemic put them under great pressure, as concerns about the sustainability of the sites and their associated activities increased. All over the world gardens had to temporarily close their gates, and this was followed by a sharp drop in visitors and an immediate loss of revenue [4,12–16]. Despite this, there were also positive effects [15,17]. In the periods when COVID-19 cases eased, reopening implied adopting new rules, along with the implementation of contingency plans and the consequent application of safety measures [4,15]. Furthermore, creative solutions were devised and strategic measures were reinforced to maintain or increase interest in the gardens by interacting and engaging with more diverse audiences, particularly through the digital tools available [15,17,18].

Although studies on the effects of COVID-19 on tourism in overall terms and on particular segments or attractions, such as museums, have been fruitful, a gap has been noticed with regard to research on gardens as tourist attractions. These are often the core of the tourist attraction of a locality, and it is widely recognized that COVID-19 has highlighted the value of engagement with gardens, parks and green spaces, both private and public [18–21]. This is the contextual framework for this paper, which sets out to expand knowledge on this subject both through insights from the literature and from a questionnaire applied to garden owners/managers. For the first time, the performance during the pandemic of a selected group of Portuguese historic gardens, regarded as major attractions, has been analyzed, and this provides the basis for the relevance and originality of this research. The paper's purpose is to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the visiting and management of the gardens, focusing on the following research topics: (i) closing times and associated drops in visitor numbers; (ii) the general negative and positive impacts and difficulties felt; (iii) the safety precautions applied during the reopening; and (iv) the measures taken to keep the gardens functioning and reaching people during this period,

with particular emphasis on digital activity and the way digital technologies were used to fulfill the gardens' model of nature and culture appreciation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Visiting Gardens as a Growing World Phenomenon

In the last two decades, and particularly before the COVID-19 outbreak, gardens worldwide enjoyed an unprecedented growth in visitor numbers, thanks to their reputation and popularity as tourist attractions, as well as the abundance and diversity of spaces. It was not just a fad, ephemeral and therefore easily replaceable, but rather a trend that was becoming established which placed garden tourism in the ranks of phenomena within the cultural tourism and recreation of postmodern society [3,22,23].

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Benfield [3] reported 150 million visitors to the world's public gardens, a number that could reach 300 million if visitors to private gardens were included. Two decades later, the same author [4] reported a figure of around 1 billion visitors, identifying garden tourism as the fastest growing segment of the tourism sector (7% per year), and inherently one of the most important and largest contemporary outdoor leisure sectors. Taking Great Britain as an example is paradigmatic, as it is widely known to be one of the largest issuing and receiving markets for garden visitors [22,24]. In 2019, gardens were the second-most visited attraction by British residents, reaching nearly 70 million visitors. Notable was Kew Gardens, which, with over 2.3 million visitors, was the second-most visited paid attraction in England [25]. In 2018 the National Trust welcomed 25 million visitors to its properties, representing 5% year-on-year growth [4].

The continuous emergence of new gardens has been fueling this growth. Woods [26], in his list of the most spectacular gardens of the past 20 years, identified over 100 new gardens in this period, while the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) receives applications for at least 10 new gardens each year [4]. The trend in visitor growth is not explained by new attractions alone, however. Several strategies and initiatives were implemented and investments made, many supported by financial programs, with the mission not only to protect this heritage but also to enhance it, and these have somehow helped to attract new markets, particularly the Millennial generation. According to Benfield [4], this group has been the focus of gardens' efforts because they are their future new visitors. The creation of transnational networks and routes such as the European Garden Heritage Network and the European Route of Historic Gardens, or more regional/local routes such as the routes of the historic gardens of Portugal, has confirmed their historical, artistic and social value. This value has also been confirmed through various distinctions such as heritage classifications, either within UNESCO's world heritage or in the national domain, and the granting of certifications such as the *jardin remarquable* in France [1].

This growing momentum is additionally justified through the gardens' own qualities—material and immaterial—in the historical, cultural, botanical or social domains, making it indisputable that gardens, especially historic ones, have a high intrinsic value expressed in their beauty, and thus constitute attractions in their own right [3,4,22,27,28].

New leisure and tourism needs, increasingly embedded in the realm of experiences, have also played a part in boosting interest in gardens [4], as garden tourism fits perfectly in this context of tourist experiences with its emphasis on visual and olfactory experience [4,29]. Gardens have a pivotal and distinguishing role in terms of what they offer. First, because the 'imagescape' is changing every day, week, month and season, they cannot offer a standardized product [30]; second, gardens bring together natural and cultural heritage elements, two dimensions that, individually or linked together, feed and increase tourist activity and appeal. Finally, they are flexible spaces that change according to the recreational and touristic needs of their visitors, supporting various motivations for visits [1].

2.2. *The Disruptive Effect of COVID-19*

2.2.1. Tourism, Culture Heritage and Digital Technologies

The pandemic caused by the coronavirus had a ripple effect on all aspects of human life as we know it [31], with severe and extensive impacts on various aspects of everyday life such as economic, social and health [32]. Routines, social interactions and the use of public space were affected as, in the wake of the outbreak, many countries applied restrictive measures based on physical/social distancing to prevent the transmission of the virus [6]. Mass confinement was widely used during the most critical periods, and ‘stay at home’ in an attempt to reduce transmission quickly became a hashtag constantly repeated by the media [33]. In addition, this context motivated the arrival of a set of documents and plans with prevention measures to be implemented in the most diverse daily situations aligned with national guidelines.

Restricting mobility as a means of mitigating the spread of the disease had immediate, severe and disruptive consequences on the global economy [34,35], particularly in the leisure and tourism sector where the effect was huge and unprecedented, thereby revealing the vulnerability of the tourism and hospitality sector [6,8,35–37]. In an early assessment, Gössling, Scott and Hall [6] (p. 1) noted: ‘Unprecedented global travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders are causing the most severe disruption of the global economy since World War II’. There were sharp drops in the main tourism indicators, as indicated by the successive reports produced by the World Tourism Organization, and this cut across various regions [10].

The overtourism from which many tourist sites suffered before the pandemic, and that had been consistently and recurrently filling discussions on tourism and sustainability in tourism [38–40], gave way to non-tourism [6], to stillness, emptiness and silence [41,42]. Regions, localities, streets, sites and activities emptied of people, of tourists, of daily life and leisure [43]. Museums, monuments, theaters, hotels, craft stores, cafes and restaurants closed; beaches, ski resorts and cruise ships emptied; events of various kinds were cancelled or postponed [6,8,37]. Tourist hot spots became cold [43]. Huge and exceptional socio-economic impacts have been recorded but are still being accounted for [37]. Paradoxically, this forced halt in tourism dynamics contributed to enhancing environmental quality, especially in terms of water and air [44,45]. However, in some protected areas impacts ranged from reduced human pressure to overcrowding when visiting restrictions were lifted [44].

This global crisis, which saw travel, tourism, hospitality and events being closed and cancelled around almost the whole world, also provided an opportunity to discover possibilities [46], to rethink and rebuild an efficient response to the needs imposed by the pandemic, with the vision of not only restarting, but doing so in a more inclusive, balanced, innovative, resilient and sustainable way [47–49]. On the one hand, there was a demand for less massified destinations, more distant places, rural and natural environments, as well as outdoor activities and experiences in closer contact with nature and more in line with environmental sustainability assumptions [50–52]. In this context, it should be noted that green spaces enjoy a set of conditions that meet the needs and imperatives imposed by COVID-19; they are spaces of choice as demand recovers, but also during periods of confinement [53,54], when they were places of exception that people were allowed to visit [33]. On the other hand, the role that culture, creativity, collaboration, innovation and the digital transformation of tourism would play in tourism’s resumption and recovery was recognized [37,49]. In the case of digitalization, this was taken to be one of the priorities in terms of long-term impact policies [47], given the growing commitment to using digital technologies in culture, leisure and tourism [55,56] that went from a trend to a requirement [57].

Thus, in the midst of the pandemic period, which forced drastic cuts in mobility and travel, digital technologies very soon became the pillars of personal and professional life and went through unparalleled acceleration [58]. A boom in online activities aiming at replacing in-person activities was registered. Telework, teleconferencing, online shopping,

telehealth, online learning and ‘teleleisure’ increased during COVID-19 [59]. ICT, platforms and technological innovations with their attendant possibilities and content played a positive role during COVID-19, placing themselves as a key mechanism to combat the harmful effects of the pandemic [60], as they enabled and empowered people to stay connected and close, to interact with people, places and brands, and to participate in some activities without being exposed to the risk of infection related to travel [61].

This digitalization included the increased use of automation in the context of transportation, accommodation, food and drink and tourist experience [55]. By early June 2020, it was assumed that digital technology was helping the cultural heritage sector and enhancing the cultural heritage experience [61], and that virtual tours and online experiences would gradually increase [56]. For example, the Culture and Cultural Heritage Division of the European Council prepared a list of activities and sites of art, culture and heritage throughout Europe that people could visit and explore from home via digital platforms [62]. Additionally, UNESCO, as part of its #ShareOurHeritage campaign, launched an interactive online exhibition featuring dozens of World Heritage properties from all over the world and allowing virtual tours of them [63]. Many other experiences related to cultural tourism activities were transferred to digital platforms, with social media in place as a key platform for sharing cultural material. Thus it is that the traditional concept of space in tourism is undergoing a transformation towards cyberspace [55,61]. ‘The digitalization of museums is one of the most visible digital outputs of the pandemic’ [55] (p. 851). According to the Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe, 80% of them have increased their digital services to reach audiences, and some museums have reported an increase in online visits [64].

COVID-19 had a catalyzing effect on innovation in culture and tourism. Digital technologies have placed themselves as highly relevant partners. Digitalization has influenced access, production and dissemination, supported by assumptions of creativity, innovation and the sharing of experiences with very positive results.

2.2.2. The Particular Case of Gardens’ Attractions

This was no different for gardens. Because of COVID-19, as part of efforts to mitigate the risk of disease transmission, gardens were closed in early spring (March), their main season (particularly in the Northern Hemisphere). This decision had repercussions in several areas, as noted in reports and/or information notes from garden associations or private gardens, as well as from scientific studies [12–15,65–68].

In this context, it is appropriate to mention the Florence Charter on the safeguarding of historic gardens. This document states that ‘(. . .) any historic garden is designed to be seen and walked about in (. . .)’, and that it is ‘(. . .) a place of enjoyment suited to meditation or repose (. . .)’ [69] (pp. 2–3). At the origin of its conception is thus the assumption of use, appreciation, living and experiencing by individuals. With COVID-19 and the ensuing compulsory closure, the basic reason for the existence of gardens was annulled, at least in its traditional form, which is physical and presential and allows the experience of visiting a garden fully and holistically. The succession of moments in the natural cycle of gardens, materialized in the visual spectacle created by the colored blossoms that composed the ‘imagescape’, remained extraneous to everything [17] and was, in many cases, appreciated only by gardeners, in that ‘It’s frustrating because the garden has its meaning when we are sharing it’ [70]. Maintenance efforts were fairly thankless without a public to appreciate them, but necessary nonetheless and recommended, since a designed landscape, like that of gardens, can be quickly lost without maintenance and the cost of restoring it after a period of neglect can be substantially higher [16,66].

The loss of visitors and income was the immediate consequence of closure [4,12–16]. As an example, the APGA [12] reported that, at the end of March 2020, about 96% of members were fully or partially closed and only 4% remained open to the public. This situation worsened in the months that followed. Although the overall decline in visitors is difficult to estimate, the analysis of specific cases gives an account of the extent of this crisis.

Hodor et al. [15], regarding the study focusing on the members of the European Network of Historic Gardens, found that the drop in visitor volume in the second quarter of 2020 in the gardens of Central and Eastern Europe was between 40% and 50% compared to the figures recorded in 2018/2019. In the gardens of Western European countries, the falls were not so dramatic, ranging between 1% and 13%. In the specific case of Great Britain, despite the sharp drop in visits, they remained the second most visited attraction in these two critical years of the pandemic. Kew Gardens, which moved from second position in 2019 to become the most visited paid attraction in England in the following two years, lost 47% of its public in 2020; although it recovered in 2021, losses were still around 15%. At the RHS Garden Wisley, the drop was 20%, and the recovery was significant because in 2021 they recorded 14% more visitors than in 2019 [25].

In Portugal, the available data for botanical gardens reveal a drop of about 68% in 2020 and 29% in 2021 compared with 2019, although there is a significant recovery in 2021. The drop in foreign visitors was not as abrupt as one might suppose (−14% and −9%, respectively), but in the case of visitors from schools this decline has been heightened as they represent only 1% of the public visiting the botanical gardens, while free admissions gained importance, especially in 2020, as a strategy to attract the public [71].

Most of the historic parks and gardens, whatever their legal nature or management model, are heavily dependent on the revenue generated by visitors, either from ticket sales or consumption in facilities such as cafes and stores and even the rental of spaces. As such, the imposition of closure led to an immediate and drastic loss of revenue, and others suffered funding cuts. The financial difficulties unavoidably cut across all the gardens. In the case of APGA [12], in March 2020, the loss was estimated at over USD\$3 million per day in earned revenue. The decrease in revenue had repercussions on the maintenance of the gardens, which was also threatened by the consequent reduction in staff. Regarding the gardens that are part of the European Historic Gardens Route, about 25% experienced garden degradation [15]. However, the repercussions were much broader, from the cancellation or postponement of education classes, programs, activities, of formal events (e.g., weddings and externally booked meetings, concerts) and fundraising events, to the reduction of membership sales and increase in employee layoffs and furloughs [12,16,18]. On the labor front, APGA [13] reports that in April and May 2020 more than 90% of the gardens kept only essential staff on site, imposing high percentage cuts in working hours, resorting to remote and rotating work and layoffs/furloughs, in addition to the suspension of volunteer work programs.

In their response and adjustment to this pandemic context, gardens and garden associations produced recommendations in addition to notes about the effects of COVID-19. APGA developed an online subsection dedicated to COVID-19 where a few key updates were posted about how the effects of the pandemic were evolving. This was done through monthly surveys, documentary resources for business financial assistance, reopening considerations and planning, employee management and operational resources, and also suggestions for its member gardens' employees when facing the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It further called on gardens to continue to be prepared, proactive and positive, recognizing that gardens would emerge and could serve as resilient centers for communities in need of them [72]. The *Comité des Parcs et Jardins de France* published *COVID-19—Réouverture et Charte Sanitaire*, with recommendations for the opening of gardens, showing the country divided into two zones with rules adjusted to each of them [73]. The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) provided a COVID Safe Plan to reduce the risk of virus transmission with actions and obligations covering aspects such as hygiene, cleaning, physical distancing, limiting workplace attendance, response to a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 case, and record keeping [74]. The National Lottery Heritage Fund and environmental charity Greenspace Scotland also launched a guide to managing parks, gardens and green spaces safely during the coronavirus pandemic, with guidelines about safe parks, visitors, activities, staff, management of volunteers and contractors, infrastructure and facilities, and communication [75]. Other documents dealing with the

same question have been published by a number of organizations and partnerships in the UK [15]. In Portugal, no specific plan for gardens has been established. They are considered together with other types of heritage assigned to the Directorate General of Cultural Heritage in the document Measures, Guidelines, and Recommendations—Cultural Heritage in Safe Return [76]. In addition to safeguarding issues related to hygiene and safety procedures, there is a shared concern for keeping in touch with communities and user groups, looking to the online platforms as a way to achieve that.

At the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, the National Garden Scheme suggested digital as the way to spread and share information about the gardens and highlighted websites and social media accounts, including on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, as ways to overcome the impediment to physical visits [77]. On the European Route of Historic Gardens online page [66] the need to ‘re-orient the visitor experience towards visual and virtual visits, making good use of technology’ was also mentioned. The gardens took advantage of technology that put them just a click away. Efforts to strengthen virtual presence by providing online activities, challenges and education programs are reported, many of them using interactive tools, content updated daily through posts, photos, videos and stories in the social media outlets, virtual plant advice from experts via Facebook Live, online courses, webinars, and virtual visits [15,17,65–67]. These strategies have had a very positive reception and results. First, they helped to keep alive attention on gardens and contact with the public; second, they led to an increase in virtual engagement and interest while they were closed as well as increasing viewers on virtual tours and online classes [17,65]; third, they also invite people to plan an actual visit and to enjoy the experience of the garden [66]. It should be noted that technology was useful not only in the promotion and publicity aspect of the gardens and their activities but also at the operational level. For example, online flower sales were held [17], and robots were used to facilitate gardeners’ tasks and encourage safety [66].

Other consequences have also been reported. Many gardens donated flowers to local care homes and hospitals and/or provided free virtual educational services, thus strengthening the ties and links between the gardens and their communities [13]. The closure periods and the falls in visitor numbers also had positive repercussions in terms of the space and time aspects. Positive environmental changes were recognized, such as landscape stability, increased vegetation and biodiversity in land cover, and enhanced animal presence [15]. Construction works, restoration, improvement of gardens, infrastructure and, at the phytosanitary level, enrichment and conservation of the collections with the introduction of new species had an important impact on the spaces. Moreover, there was time to design new programs for guided tours, to readjust indoor activities to outdoors, to reorganize the activities to be developed, and to strengthen dissemination among the local communities [67]. Likewise, it provided an opportunity to think about new forms of management and protection of gardens, and to rethink the model of the garden visit intended for the future [66], taking into account some examples and episodes of exceeding the capacity that had been occurring.

From another standpoint, in this pandemic context, gardens, green spaces and outdoor spaces in general (real and virtual), especially in an urban context, played a vital role by providing space for various forms of leisure activities (physical activities, social activities and cultural activities) with a lower risk of infection [19,78,79]; this became a high-priority service and a critical infrastructure, contributing significantly to the promotion of people’s physical and mental health and wellbeing during lockdown [18,79,80]. In the specific case of historic gardens, this crucial role is also addressed and admitted by The Gardens Trust [16], the National Garden Scheme [18] and the European Route of Historic Gardens [66].

3. Methodology

This exploratory study was based on a questionnaire survey applied, after more than a year and a half of pandemic garden management, to a selected group of owners and managers of Portuguese historic gardens. It was completed through an online platform be-

tween October and December 2021. Thirty-six sites were selected that could be considered major tourist attractions or otherwise significant and interesting, with a well-developed tourist welcoming structure, covering mainland Portugal and the archipelagos of Madeira and Azores (Table 1). Studies, publications [1,81], inventories [82–84] and previous knowledge about Portuguese gardens were crucial for the selection of participants. There is no accurate reporting on the number of gardens in Portugal. Looking at the inventories of landscape art in Portugal, it is estimated that there could be more than a thousand gardens. Naturally, not all of them are tourist gardens or even open to the public. Among the various inventories the disparity in numbers is as evident as the missing or incomplete information on their tourist use [2]. However, cross-checking the data from several sources indicates there could be around 100 gardens open to the public, but not all of them have a developed tourist structure or are effective tourist attractions. This study mainly included gardens regarded as major attractions in order to gain an understanding of the real impact of COVID-19 on gardens in the various dimensions. The distribution is in line with the proportion of gardens in each region [2], with Lisbon Metropolitan Area leading the way. The overall response rate was about 58%, regionally distributed as shown in Table 1, with response rates above 50% except for Madeira. It should also be noted that about 60% of the gardens that participated in this study have a protected status, an indicator of their exceptional characteristics.

Table 1. Distribution of sent and received questionnaires by region and respective response rate.

Region	Sent		Answers		Answer Rate
	No.	%	No.	%	%
North	8	22.2	6	28.6	75.0
Center	5	13.9	3	14.3	60.0
Lisbon	12	33.3	7	33	58.3
Madeira	6	16.7	2	9.5	33.3
Azores	5	13.9	3	14.3	60.0
Total	36	100.0	21	100.0	58.3

The questionnaire was developed by the authors using the Google Docs platform, with the link emailed to the owners and/or managers of the gardens. Studies that focused on the impact of the pandemic on tourist attractions, not only gardens [15] but museums, too, for example [85], were taken into account when developing this instrument. It was organized in four categories of questions: (i) general considerations about the effects of the pandemic on gardens; (ii) management and maintenance of gardens in the pandemic context; (iii) visiting gardens during the pandemic; and (iv) visiting gardens post-COVID-19. In addition to using a five-point Likert scale in some of them, the questionnaire also included closed- and open-ended questions.

The data were processed, entered into a database and analyzed using SPSS software. Given the small sample size in some open questions, an interpretive content analysis was performed. A preliminary descriptive analysis of some of the questions was carried out and is presented in the next section.

4. Results Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Gardens' Characteristics

Of the 21 gardens that participated in this study, three major types stand out: (i) those known as *quintas de recreio* [recreational farms] (38%), which are, moreover, the most typical units of landscape art in Portugal [1,2,86], all associated with palaces or important mansions; (ii) botanical gardens (29%), more than half of which in the country participated in this study, knowing beforehand that their intrinsic characteristics ensure that they are recognized as vital cultural assets that are important to the tourism heritage of many cities as they are commonly visited sites in various destinations [3,4,87]; (iii) parks (29%), spaces

that are usually larger and include a wide range of services and attractions, from catering to museology, as well as hosting numerous events of diverse natures. It should be added that the whole sample includes very different spaces in terms of landscape style, size, heritage qualities and tourist welcoming structure [1].

There is a balance in the legal nature of the properties in the sample obtained, since 52.4% are private and 47.6% are public. Although most of the national (historic) gardens are private, it is true that those that are in the public domain have been able to establish themselves as attractions of significant size, often benefiting from (privileged) channels of access to funding. This enables them to have multidisciplinary teams working not only on the physical area of the garden but also on everything that is involved in structuring an attraction, especially in terms of creating a visitor welcome and promotion structure. In the case of Portugal, the private nature of most gardens has been an obstacle to their preservation, promotion and enhancement. This is because of a constellation of factors associated with the aging of owners, lack of financial capacity, lack of interest, neglect and subsequent degradation. Nevertheless, there are some private gardens that occupy a prominent place in the tourist appeal of destinations, particularly the gardens located on Madeira and some in the area of Lisbon and Sintra [1]. These benefit not only from their location (areas of great tourist interest, largely thanks to the concentration of a range of attractions), but also from their legal organization, their renown, and their historical, artistic and social value. More than 75% of the surveyed gardens are in an urban setting or in the periphery of one. It should be noted that most of the gardens that are identified as major attractions are actually in cities [1], as they find favorable conditions there for their development as attractions. In particular they have access to a potential public, since cities benefit from huge cultural capital that is attractive to tourists and the general population [88,89].

The 21 gardens that responded to this survey questionnaire include examples with visitor numbers in the two years before the outbreak of the pandemic ranging from about 10 thousand/year (recorded in a botanical garden in the Azores) to over a million (in two places located in Lisbon and Sintra). More specifically, 40% show visitor numbers of up to 50,000 and 45% received between 100,000 and 500,000 visitors in 2018 and 2019. In the cases where the answer was complete, examining the data for those two years, it can be seen that around 67% recorded an increase in visitors, notably one in the Lisbon area with almost 50% more in 2019 than in 2018. Only 28% recorded a decline in numbers, albeit fairly small (between 1% and 9%), the only exception being a botanical garden in Lisbon which had closed in the meantime for rehabilitation works. Moreover, more than half of the gardens that participated in this study have a protected status (seven of them are classified as National Monuments), thus confirming the exceptional nature of the spaces, which helps to justify the visitor figures presented.

In relation to visitor numbers, the substantial disparity at the extremes should be noted. Most Portuguese gardens have relatively small numbers of visitors; there are gardens with around 10,000 visitors per year and many with even fewer, while others have visitor numbers that exceed one million. The type/design, but especially the small size of most gardens, means that they cannot accommodate hundreds of thousands or more than a million visitors. However, although visitor numbers are not extraordinary, they could not be excluded from this study because they are important to the destinations or because their particular renown, in many cases at an international level.

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, most owners or managers expected an increase in visitation, mainly involving the international market and groups organized by tour operators. They were more reticent about the local market and repeating visitors, with 52% and 67% respectively hoping to maintain the previous level.

4.2. Garden Management and Adaptation in the Context of the Pandemic Consequences

In Portugal, from March 2020 to April 2021, 15 states of emergency were declared in just over a year, including renewals, totaling more than 200 days, which included mandatory

lockdowns and restrictions on movement on public roads. Part of the mitigation efforts to reduce the transmission of the disease included closing monuments and palaces, museums, thematic parks, cultural spaces and gardens across the country during the COVID-19 outbreak. This happened either by direct imposition, through the suspension of service provision activities, or indirectly, by forbidding citizens to circulate on public roads and the imposition of the requirement to remain at home [33]. Over a period of a year and a half, the surveyed gardens were closed for an average of about 3.5 months; approximately 52% were closed for a period longer than the average, with the focus on five months (29%). The number of months closed varied from garden to garden; one of the gardens in this sample never closed its gates (an open and public park, although private in nature) and another extended its closure for seven months (a garden associated with a palace on a private *quinta de recreio*). This average period was about one month more than the benchmark presented in the literature, 2.5 months in a set of European historic gardens [15]. It also exceeded the three months recorded for Spanish museums [85], although it should be noted that only the period until August 2020 was considered in the first case, and in the second it was until November 2020. About 55% of the gardens that were closed for longer than the average were in public ownership; of those that were closed for a shorter time than the average, 60% were privately owned, some of which were linked to the hotel industry, revealing a need to resume their activity. Most of the botanical gardens in this study were closed for a shorter time than the recorded average. Although it was forbidden to stay in public leisure spaces such as parks or gardens, botanical gardens and other gardens with free entrance made a crucial contribution to meeting the short-term healthy leisure needs that were allowed during periods of lockdown [33].

The most extensive closure(s) in 2020, widely lamented, and even the capacity limitations imposed when they reopened resulted in a decline in visitor numbers in general and in tours and leisure activities, the main source of income for the gardens (as reported by 62% of the sample). Regarding the fall in visitor numbers, the data provided from 17 gardens reveal that by 2020 about 76% of the gardens' visitors fell to less than half of the figure recorded in 2019, 58% with breaks between 70% and 89%. These values far exceed those found in a selected group of European Historic Gardens, thereby contradicting the finding that the drop in visitors was not so dramatic in Western European gardens [15]. By 2021, although figures are still lower than those from 2019, there is already a trend of recovery in visitor numbers compared to 2020 in 71% of gardens, of which around 60% have gains greater than 50%. Some of them show visitor numbers very close to those reached in 2019. Consequently, the loss of income indicated by 57% put the gardens in a dramatic situation at the financial level as it represented a serious threat to the sustainable management and maintenance of the sites, intensified by the reduction in both administrative and operational (gardening) workers and by the increase in expenses, particularly in terms of hygiene and safety. This was confirmed by the garden owners and managers when asked about the main negative impacts, which are in line with the narrative in the literature [4,12,13,15]. In addition to the financial difficulties, the constant changes in rules and the need to adapt the service and its visitors were also mentioned, along with controls on proximity and contact with the public. In this context, one of the gardens admits that the general public did not take up digital actions/activities to any great extent. Furthermore, there were difficulties in working with school pupils due to lack of resources in schools that would allow the implementation of online activities or because more complex logistics were involved. Conversely, the constant work of making contact with the public led to digital exhaustion, a difficulty identified in two cases.

However, the closure periods and the absence of visitors and activities in the gardens also resulted in time being gained, and allowed some (heavy) maintenance work to be carried out without causing significant constraints to visitors. In addition, several initiatives scheduled for closed spaces were moved to the gardens, open spaces, and in the open air; visitors spread into less well known and less visited areas of the gardens, avoiding crowds in the most visited places; other audiences, especially the local public, were attracted

through greater dissemination benefiting from new technologies, which, according to some officials, provided greater experience in working with digital content. Only one manager did not identify any positive effect. These answers seem to point to a recognition, although restricted to certain parameters, of the opportunity provided by COVID-19—a premise widely recognized by the World Tourism Organization [37,49], likewise demonstrated in the literature [9,90] and through the analysis of specific cases [15,65,67].

The reopening after periods of confinement was marked by the adoption of a set of safety measures in various areas, including working, social and daily life, as well as leisure and tourism. Almost all surveyed gardens were able to adapt to the safety requirements and adopted a wide range of rules following the matrix of guidelines defined at the national level. These basically included the mandatory use of masks (100%) and physical/social distancing (90.5%), which were, in fact, the structural safety measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 most widely adopted worldwide [91,92]. These results are in line not only with those found by Hodor et al. [15] for gardens, but also with others arising in the specific field of museums [85]. Hand disinfection (81.0%) completes the trilogy, although the disinfection of benches and other rest areas and reducing the number of visitors in the overall space, but particularly in guided tours, were also seen as relevant and applied in more than half of the gardens. The definition of entry and exit circulation (42.9%) is also added. This last measure had a substantially higher application (close to 90%) in museums, for example [85], given that they are closed and relatively limited spaces. Reducing the opening hours, which was relevant in the study mentioned above [15], was less important in this study, and was only adopted by 29% of the gardens. Moreover, the ticket booking system widely used in the National Trust properties [68] had little impact on the surveyed gardens. The option to close visitor reception facilities (e.g., shop, bar/café, restaurant, toilets) was implemented in only 24% of the gardens. Regarding the evaluation of the performance of Portuguese botanical gardens in 2020 [67], the control of body temperature and the suspension of the distribution of paper leaflets and pamphlets were not mentioned by the gardens in this study. The adoption of these measures rather than imposing compliance with standards was of the utmost importance to restore the confidence of visitors who, after or even during periods of confinement, made their choices.

Resilience is a principle widely associated with tourism activity [93], especially in periods of more severe crisis [7]. Alongside the most negative events and effects of the pandemic in the sector, proactivity, adaptation, entrepreneurship and resilience started to drive both discourses and concrete actions in the fight to overcome the harmful effects of COVID-19 [47,60,90,94,95]. Like other tourist attractions, especially those that are based on and nurtured by the heritage in its various forms that gives them meaning and a reason for existence, such as museums, museum centers and monuments, gardens embarked on and/or strengthened measures and strategies to overcome the effects of the pandemic. They did so by encouraging physical (when allowed to reopen) and virtual visits, resorting mainly to digital technologies as a resilience strategy so that their relationship with the public was not interrupted, especially when the public could not be physically present.

Table 2 contrasts the performance of the gardens before and during the pandemic. It shows that, apart from the items 'Online presence on various platforms' and 'Publication of content on social networks', the most relevant in both periods, most of the listed measures did not exist in the pre-pandemic period. Furthermore, they were not implemented in this specific context in more than half of the surveyed gardens, particularly in the digital domain, highlighting the 'Augmented Reality Experiences', 'Virtual tours of garden's sections' and the 'Online campaigns'. These results seem to indicate some inertia, lack of interest or lack of the physical/technical, intellectual or financial resources favoring a more proactive performance adjusted to reality by a group of gardens. This is inconsistent with, for example, the performance observed in almost 70% of Spanish museums, where network and online campaigns to encourage visits are conspicuous [85], in a more expressive reinforcement of digital activity/presence [64,85].

Table 2. Strategies to encourage visits that were in place before the pandemic and which were adopted in response to it.

Measures	1	2	3	4	5
Online presence on various platforms	52.4	42.9	0.0	0.0	4.8
Virtual tours of garden's sections (e.g.,: 360° videos)	4.8	19.0	4.8	0.0	71.4
Virtual guided tours	4.8	9.5	4.8	19.0	61.9
Augmented Reality Experiences	14.3	0.0	0.0	4.8	81.0
Publication of videos/podcasts about the garden	9.5	33.3	0.0	9.5	47.6
Online broadcasting of events	0.0	14.3	0.0	19.0	66.7
Online courses, workshops, seminars, exhibitions	9.5	14.3	0.0	23.8	52.4
Publication of content on social networks	38.1	52.4	0.0	0.0	9.5
Advance sale/online of tickets	33.3	0.0	4.8	0.0	61.9
Free entry at certain times	38.1	9.5	0.0	4.8	47.6
Special activities/promotions	23.8	4.8	4.8	9.5	57.1
Network campaigns	9.5	4.8	4.8	0.0	81.0
Online campaigns	19.0	9.5	4.8	0.0	66.7
Other advertising campaigns	19.0	9.5	4.8	0.0	66.7

Key: 1—Already existed, and has been maintained; 2—Already existed, but is now reinforced; 3—It was already envisaged, despite the pandemic; 4—Implemented, due to pandemic; 5—Did not exist and was not implemented.

Digital activity was a very important, if not a priority, line of work during the closures. The aim was to maintain contact and be noticed by the public, attract interest, and favor the reopening [64,85], amounting to a reaction to the general increase in the visibility of digital cultural heritage on the Internet. In the case of this study, it was mainly to the level of online communication and promotion that the gardens' strategy was drawn, as shown in Table 2. In this context, it was found that an online presence on various platforms, especially the web page and the Facebook and Instagram social networks, had already been adopted in the pre-pandemic period by almost all the gardens under study, while slightly more than half (52.4%) maintained this presence to the same extent and about 43% reinforced it in the pandemic context, particularly with regard to social networks whose publication of content was increased in about 52% of the gardens. These data show that more than 90% of these gardens already had a digital presence despite COVID-19. This is an extremely positive figure that reflects an evolution from what had previously been regarded as one of their weaknesses, when it was found that less than 40% of about 100 Portuguese historic gardens promoted themselves online [1]. This reflects the recognition by these attractions that existing in the digital world is vital to the demands of the global world of postmodernity characterized by the intense flow of information produced and consumed.

The pandemic motivated offer diversification, with the emergence of online courses, workshops, seminars and exhibitions (23.8%), as well as virtual guided tours (19.0%) and the online broadcasting of events (19.0%). In terms of publishing videos and podcasts, which was much less common before the COVID-19 outbreak, this was reinforced in 33% of the gardens. These results are not only in keeping with the narrative in the studies and reports produced on this subject, but they also demonstrate the relevance of digital media in bringing the gardens to the attention of the public in the context of a pandemic, as they allowed projecting an experience that is essentially physical into the virtual field, reinterpreting it and enriching its value offer. It became clear that the focus and the confirmed increase were mainly centered on a set of strategies associated with digital services, such as 'feeding' the social networks. In an early moment, this does not require large financial investment or human resources with great experience or skills, but simple technological tools such as a tablet or smartphone and material, especially visual, which is easily and almost immediately published and shared with the world. However, activities more demanding in terms of investment in financial, technical and human resources, not to mention time, have been, and in COVID-19 contexts were, sidelined or even overlooked, as happened with virtual visits or augmented reality experiences, the live streaming of events and online learning. Initially it might be assumed that gardens that figure as major tourist attractions because of their size and tourism structure would be more involved

with these technological innovations, or that the pandemic would challenge them in that sense, but this was not the case in this sample. As for virtual visits, the gardens that already offered and boosted them are mostly botanical or have no entry fee; virtual guided tours and augmented reality are rare and engaged in mainly by botanical gardens, and those in the Lisbon area with paid admission but which are public in nature.

Gardens that implemented and/or reinforced more measures in general, although some present a high percentage of measures that neither existed nor were implemented, are publicly owned gardens, i.e., botanical gardens with paid entrance, but many do not correspond to those with higher visitation rates. Nevertheless, two private gardens have the highest absolute number of strategies. However, gardens that did not implement any measures or were limited almost exclusively to maintaining existing strategies are mostly private ones or parks, with a balance between gardens with a larger and smaller tourist element.

Digital and social media become more and more influential in people's everyday lives. According to the literature [96–98] social media is one of the most important avenues of communication and promotion in tourism as well as in decision support. Furthermore, it is known that digital technologies can be used as tools to improve the quality of experience for visitors, visitor engagement and accessibility to a wider public, and also to influence visitors' spatial and digital behaviors. This forms a new paradigm in the relationship between an attraction and its users. Social media are a major component of garden marketing for visit development, with a significant relevance to garden tourism as gardens have a chance to promote themselves, reach and connect with a wider audience in an immediate and affordable way; they are therefore quite popular with gardens [4]. Specifically, regarding digital communication, only four gardens (19.0%), located in the North region and Madeira, created platforms during the pandemic period, namely their own website, Facebook and Instagram accounts. This suggests an a priori awareness of the power of these platforms and the fact that they are accessible, user-friendly and highly effective tools. These were, moreover, the most used channels during the lockdown periods for communicating and spreading content (42.9%, 52.4% and 42.9%, respectively), in line with what was found in museums, although Twitter also stood out in this respect [64,85,99]. Facebook stands out, confirming its popularity in the pre-pandemic context [4]. Only two gardens of a public nature denied using any digital platform.

On these platforms the informational flow is sustained mainly by the image, and the consumption of images is almost instantaneous and involuntary in the hypervisualization typical of mass culture [100]. Gardens are visual realities, and, in this framework, social media acquire a significant relevance to garden tourism by enabling the dissemination of images of gardens almost instantaneously [4]. The provision of images/photos and videos was quite a popular measure for gardens during the pandemic as a way to overcome the impossibility of physical visits [15,17]. The results of this study confirm this trend. About 81% of the content posted on social media were photographic records, followed by videos (47.6%), the posting of which was, as shown in Table 2, enhanced due to the pandemic. This was followed by miscellaneous information about the garden, in particular about the history of the garden (47.6%), while less important was information about memories of past events/activities and about activities for the aftermath of the pandemic. Only one site, a greenhouse, claimed to provide information and interesting facts about plant species and their maintenance. Two gardens, associated with hotel units, admitted having only posted photos, and more than half (52.4%) differentiated the contents by pointing out three or more types. Interestingly, it is not the gardens with a larger number of visitors or with the highest level of classification—national monument—that have a greater diversity of posted content, apart from one park in the north. The diversity of content made available by some gardens reflects the different approaches implemented to reach the public.

These results prove that digital content is crucial in a pandemic context and are clearly in line with the preferences and consumer behaviors expressed in other studies, specifically a study about Millennials' social media characteristics and habits as they relate to garden

visitation, which found that Facebook was their preferred platform and images, videos and articles the most favored posts [4]. It was also clear that social networks evolved from mere communication channels to cultural and knowledge dissemination tools [99]. Some gardens, for example, used these platforms to share information and interesting facts about certain species; others provided guided tours and posted quizzes.

Despite the increased online presence of gardens through the diversification of platforms and content, the frequency of posting on the most used platform during the lockdown periods was variable. In this specific case, more than half of the gardens (57.1%) reported weekly and monthly attendance in ex aequo, and only 38.1% admitted to daily posts. Considering that the pandemic led to a greater availability and openness of citizens to the digital world in this period and a greater connection with the content of social networks, whose novelty is constantly sought by users, this was a key opportunity to consolidate the attraction of the desired target audience, as well as interaction, engagement and loyalty to the gardens and what they offer.

Managers of the gardens also suggested new kinds of visits or visits to new spaces in the garden as well as safety and other measures that have been reinforced and/or implemented due to COVID-19.

The strategies adopted influenced the gardens' attractiveness and visibility in both physical and digital terms (Table 3). According to the results, about 33% of the respondents report an increase in physical visitors following the measures adopted. And although more than half of the sample did not know, or did not answer, about the impact on virtual visitors, around 29% (6 units) reported an increase, although this figure is well below that recorded for European museums, for example [64]. Similarly, a significant proportion of gardens have reported increases in followers on social networks, interactions in general terms and with their own followers, indicating growing public interest in spaces of nature and culture such as gardens. The same trend was seen in Spanish museums [85], but not in Italian state museums, which also gathered a significant number of new followers despite the interactions not following the same pattern [99]. In this field, decreases are negligible, at the level of a single unit in these last two items. The data shows a tendency, though tenuous, for private gardens to have increased their physical visitors and public gardens the virtual visitors, but it was mainly private gardens that reported cross-cutting increases in all items considered. This could be related to the measures implemented being associated with the availability of funding. For instance, there is a clear correspondence between gardens that have strengthened their online presence and diversified their content and those that reported an increase in online visitors and interactions.

Table 3. Effect of management strategies adopted by the garden.

Items	Increase	No Change	Decrease	Don't Know/ No Reply
Visitors in person	33.3	28.6	23.8	14.3
Virtual visitors	28.6	4.8	0.0	66.7
Visits to the website	33.3	23.8	0.0	42.9
Followers on social media	61.9	19.0	0.0	19.0
Interactions on social media	61.9	14.3	4.8	19.0
Interaction with followers	57.1	14.3	4.8	23.8

In addition to these effects, an improvement in mail contacts and security were also mentioned, as well as in events and volunteering.

These results seem to reflect a positive response by the public to the efforts made by the management of the gardens, first in building up the perception of them as safe places, second in developing and implementing strategies to strengthen the interaction between product and consumer in order to attract interest and visitors.

Despite the general decline in attendance, more than 70% of gardens' managers confirm the attraction of new visitors during the pandemic period, mainly from the domestic

market, which became dominant in 71% of cases, and in particular from local people. This segment (re)discovered the gardens (57%) and played an important role in the resumption of activity (43%), since, as most of the respondents agree, they became popular places immediately after the lockdown periods as well as being an alternative place to visit during the pandemic; the fact that they are large open-air spaces contributed to this. This result differs from what they expected before the outbreak of the pandemic, since most owners/managers anticipated an increase in the international market. More than a half even admitted that this would be dominant, and were more reticent about the local market, with a few expecting an increase and 52% hoping to maintain it.

To conclude, in general terms there is an overall understanding that the pandemic has harmed gardens, as other studies and reports have found. On the other hand, there is also an agreement between managers and owners, although less expressive, that the pandemic offered an opportunity to the gardens. It did so by motivating the development of new points of interest (52.4%) and innovative experiences, and a focus on marketing strategies to attract visitors (47.6%). The investment in the digital dimension is also clear, with the outlay on digital platforms (52.4%) and the intensification of their use (66.7%) gaining prominence in the work routine (47.6%) (Table 4). Respondents also foresee that they will remain on online platforms (47.6%), and perhaps even increase their presence there (38.1%) in the post-COVID-19 period.

Table 4. General effects of the pandemic on the garden.

Items	1	2	3	4	5	SD
Overall, the garden has suffered due to the pandemic	4.8	14.3	23.8	42.9	14.3	1.098
The garden was able to seize the opportunity offered by the pandemic	0.0	0.0	47.6	52.4	0.0	0.510
The garden developed new points of interest	0.0	9.5	38.1	47.6	4.8	0.800
The garden bet on innovation	4.8	9.5	57.1	28.6	0.0	0.973
The garden has developed innovative experiments	4.8	19.0	28.6	33.3	14.3	1.336
The garden has developed marketing strategies to attract visitors	9.5	19.0	23.8	47.6	0.0	1.460
There has been investment in the digital platforms	4.8	9.5	33.3	52.4	0.0	1.469
Digital actions have been stepped up	4.8	19.0	9.5	61.9	4.8	1.723
Digital activity has gained emphasis in the work routine	9.5	19.0	23.8	38.1	9.5	2.017

Key: 1—Totally disagree; 2—Disagree; 3—Neither agree nor disagree; 4—Agree; 5—Totally agree; SD—Standard Deviation.

5. Conclusions

COVID-19 caused unheard-of constraints with severe consequences for human well-being and impacts on the various elements of the sustainability of tourism and tourist attractions based on cultural heritage, particularly regarding gardens. This disruptive, and at the same time challenging, period not only changed consumption patterns [6,7], but also motivated reactions, responses and adaptations that turned into a framework of opportunities and challenges. Crises of a diverse nature, which have been recurrent in tourism, exacerbate situations of uncertainty. However, it is in a context of uncertainty that creativity is stimulated, thus allowing it to play a catalytic role in creative expression, learning and development, where the possibilities offered must be exploited to the full [101]. As such, this paper bears interesting and relevant contributions that should be able to complement research literature about visiting and managing gardens in times of crisis, notably during the recent COVID-19 crisis, for which scientific studies are residual.

Thus, the aspects analyzed in this paper provide an objective picture of the immediate impact of the pandemic on a group of historic gardens in Portugal. They also shed light on the actions taken, or not taken, to overcome the constraints, while the gardens continue to offer their service and maintain the essence of a garden—‘to be seen and walked through’. Furthermore, it differs from other studies concerning the concrete strategies adopted to

attract visitors, particularly with respect to the digital issue. Overall, some major findings have been identified in the current study.

Despite the difficulties and the negative impacts provoked by the pandemic, described in last section, the results from this sample allow us to affirm that the gardens, especially those with a more significant tourism dimension, were able to adapt and continue to operate under adverse conditions. Physical maintenance and preservation work continued to be carried out, and advantage was also taken of the opportunities of the framework provided by this context, especially in the digital field, to reach, maintain and/or strengthen connections with the public, mainly in periods when the physical experience was not possible and, although physically closed, the gardens were 'open' to the public in the virtual space. This meant it was possible to offer different ways of learning and being entertained, and to help them reduce their isolation and loneliness to some extent. These responses contributed to the heritage and the financial, environmental and social sustainability of gardens. The commitment to society was also evident at the time of reopening in the implementation of safety measures in line with national guidelines and in the adaptation of face-to-face activities, which were being resumed on a limited basis. This demonstrates undeniably the resilience of gardens.

Furthermore, it is in response to the crisis that two antagonistic trends are found in this set of gardens. They are: (i) the ones that did not have and did not implement strategies to reach and attract visitors, or did keep what they already had and thus revealed some inertia and a self-indulgent position; and (ii) those which, on the contrary, turned out to be more pro-active, especially in the digital field, in trying to strengthen and diversify strategies. That investment had a positive response from the public, which indicates a trend towards strengthening the relationship and interactivity between the gardens and their users, particularly on social networks. Similarly, there was also a reconciliation and reconnection of local people with the gardens, which certainly took a leading role in this crisis.

5.1. Practical Implications

Regarding the management aspect, the results of this study bring some important insights regarding more sustainable and resilient garden attractions and garden tourism in the future, as well as owners and managers better tailoring their action to the needs of visitors and potential visitors, thus fostering gardens' sustainability. The pandemic crisis confirmed the extreme importance of having a contingency plan or action plan for crisis situations. This is something that hardly any, or maybe none, of these sites had prepared. Knowing and understanding the concrete impacts, negative and positive, of COVID-19 on gardens is crucial information. It can be used to prepare strategies to prevent and mitigate future negative aspects, which are often unavoidable, and also to exploit opportunities to improve the tourist reception structure in its various aspects (physical, human, digital). This could translate into more and better-satisfied visitors who intend to return. The severe drop in income had consequences for garden management. The situation is now being restored with the return to normality, but not with the same expression in all the gardens, which compromises their sustainability; thus, there will be cases where recovery will depend on external aid. Additionally, therefore, these results could be useful for organizations responsible for cultural heritage and tourism to develop quick and appropriate responses to the different needs of private and public gardens, not only for the current post-pandemic circumstances, but for other crises, both during and after the event.

These results also revealed the importance of applying a digital strategy to the sustainability and resilience of gardens when their traditional service is challenged. In the digital era, which was accelerated by the pandemic, it is crucial that those that did not opt for this path start following it. They should diversify their online platforms and digital content, and those who invested in the digital approach should not cool the acquired dynamics with the physical reopening of the sites in full, since it is essential for everyone that digital engagement is not perceived simply as a temporary substitute for in-person visits, so that

the connection achieved with the public during the pandemic is maintained or improved in post-COVID times. It is certain that every garden should feed the public's interest and commitment to the spaces, aware that the virtual experience can positively affect the performance of gardens by acting as an instigator/stimulator of physical visits. Attention should be paid to Instagram and YouTube (platforms with a significant quantity of Millennial users), which will gain popularity in the coming years [4]. The boom in cultural content to which people are subject leads them to select what best meets their interests, so attention must be paid to the content provided. Image-based content, which monopolizes many of the posts made by the gardens, should be complemented with other types of attractive, stimulating and engaging information, for instance, competitions, invitations to share photos taken in the garden or quizzes that assume the involvement of the public, like the Buddha Eden Garden does already. This will require a permanent systematic investment in the creation of information/content, which presupposes the permanent allocation of human resources committed to this task. Outdated information or posts that are more than a week old are unacceptable nowadays. This is because, in the case of gardens, social media networks are held to have the potential to become a major force in garden visits in the twenty-first century, as future customers, the Millennials, are more digitally engaged [4].

In the specific case of gardens, the physical experience of enjoying the spaces is irreplaceable; it corresponds to the root of their existence, as attested by the Florence Charter. However, gardens should explore (new) ways of designing the visitor experience to encompass both traditional and virtual interpretations. The case of the garden at Quinta da Regaleira is exemplary because, in addition to traditional physical visits, it also offers routes in augmented reality. Innovation and diversity are crucial vectors in defining more resilient, sustainable and interesting gardens.

The reconciliation and reconnection of local people with the gardens, those who took a leading role in this crisis, should not be overlooked by owners and managers in this return to normality. Many of the gardens had become detached from their local community and more everyday use because they had concentrated more on focusing on tourism. In the pandemic context, the relevance of the local public was admitted to be important to the resumption of activity when foreign customers were scarce due to travel limitations. Benefits in the entry and use of the sites must be considered differently for the local communities, and, above all, the wellbeing qualities of gardens should be promoted. It will be useful if in the post-COVID period this connection is maintained or reinforced in a bilateral commitment to consolidate healthy, sustainable, and more resilient communities in future crises.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

The fact that the results presented are restricted to a small sample, which thus prevents generalization, plus the lack of response from some key gardens regarded as major tourist attractions, are the main limitations of this study. Given the previous knowledge of the circumstances of these gardens, it is believed that information on their performance during the pandemic period would have been useful to reinforce some of the results obtained. This study should be continued and balanced with studies on the visitors' perception, especially regarding the impact or contribution of gardens to wellbeing during the pandemic, given that those spaces provided contact with nature with a lower risk of infection while social distancing was imperative. Future investigations about the digitalization process and the effectiveness of the way the gardens found to reach people, especially during lockdown, as well as visitor perception about the traditional and virtual garden experiences and the needs/interests of the different target audiences, could constitute key knowledge in managing the relationship with them and with the garden itself. Future studies should also include small gardens, of which there are a great many in Portugal, because, although they have a less developed tourism structure, many are relevant to the appeal of destinations, and it would be interesting to know the impacts they suffered and understand how these smaller gardens reacted during the pandemic.

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