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THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WELLNESS TOURISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GLOBAL AND CHINESE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

As a sub-market of health tourism, wellness tourism is rapidly developing globally. This study reviews the history of development and definitions of wellness tourism abroad and in China. Internationally, wellness tourism has evolved through three stages: spas, therapeutic tourism, and modern wellness tourism. In China, wellness tourism reflects changes in the business system since the founding of New China. Despite different origins, the global purpose of wellness tourism is to satisfy the health and relaxation needs of the body, mind, and spirit. In defining wellness tourism, international perspectives offer broad and narrow definitions, focusing on various wellness activities and luxury services. In China, definitions are approached from motivational, content, and distinguishing perspectives. This study aims to clarify the concept of wellness tourism, providing a comprehensive understanding to guide future research and development in this rapidly expanding field.

Keywords:

Wellness Tourism, History, Conceptual Definitions, Global and China

Introduction

Wellness tourism is considered one of the fastest-growing and most rapidly expanding sectors in today's tourism industry, with significant increases in activity worldwide (Quintela et al., 2016). Currently, the United States is the largest market, followed by China. Globally, the wellness economy accounts for approximately 5.1% of total GDP, meaning that one out of every 20 dollars consumers spend worldwide is on wellness. According to the Global Wellness Institute (2023), market sales reached USD 894.33 billion by 2022 and are projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 7.02%, reaching USD 1,343.28 billion by 2028 globally.

From an academic perspective, since the 1980s, wellness tourism has rapidly developed, becoming one of the fastest-growing areas of research in the tourism and health fields (Álvarez García et al., 2014). Given the rapid development of the wellness tourism industry, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive review of its history and definition, which contribute to its growth. This review will help identify the key trends and challenges in wellness tourism, providing valuable insights for researchers and practitioners.

History of Wellness Tourism

History of Wellness Tourism Abroad

Spas are the original form of wellness tourism and play a significant role in the industry's economy. Since ancient times, Europeans have utilized spas for wellness, as evidenced by the bathing practices in Egypt and Babylonia dating back to nearly 3000 BC. Japan exemplifies the spa tradition in Asia, dating back to the Jomon period in the first century BC. Here, the focus is on the development of spas in Europe.

The spa culture in Europe grew with the introduction of the Laconia in ancient Greece and later the Tepidarium in Rome (Jackson, 1990). The Romans developed a distinctive bathing system that included alternating baths of various temperatures (cold, warm, and hot) and spaces for exercise, relaxation, and reading. This system remains influential today. As the Roman Empire expanded, these traditional bathing cultures were introduced to other regions, including Germany, Britain, Tunisia, and Istanbul (Voigt, 2010). Eventually, these cultures spread across Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Between the sixteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, particularly in Europe (e.g., Germany, England, France, and Portugal), water use for spa purposes evolved from traditional practices to therapeutic applications. During this period, many coastal, forested, and other climatically suitable regions emerged as medically oriented destinations, capitalizing on their natural resources (Ramakrishnan et al., 1961). This shift was largely driven by the development of water-based physiotherapy hospitals and the increasing popularity of spa treatments for weight loss among Europe's wealthiest social classes.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the predominantly therapeutic approach to tourism has faced several challenges. Firstly, therapeutic tourism has not catered to the needs of all demographic groups. The overemphasis on medical functions has resulted in destinations being populated primarily by a large rehabilitating and aging population, whose health needs differ significantly from those of younger people and their families. Consequently, many of these destinations have gained a reputation for being "dull" (Li et al., 2020). Secondly, therapeutic tourism has lacked innovation. The International Federation for Climate and Spa Wellness (FEMTEC) set strict

medical standards for European spa resorts tied to insurance and state subsidies, causing stagnation in offerings with little modernization. FEMTEC also opposes lounges, fast food restaurants, and gambling in spas, especially in Germany, to protect the environment and cultural traditions. This reinforces the stereotype that wellness tourism is dull and outdated. Thirdly, the economic downturn in Europe at the end of the twentieth century led to changes in health insurance laws, excluding coverage for spa hotels and retreats. This caused a significant decline in business for those primarily offering bath therapy. Fourthly, traditional spa treatments using geothermal heat and minerals declined as antibiotic medication advanced (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Quintela et al., 2016).

Many wellness centers, medical facilities, five-star hotels, and wellness service hotels have adapted by integrating complementary resources. They leverage thermal resources natural and artificial landscapes, to offer a range of wellness products like healthy meals, beauty treatments, massages, physical activities, fitness sports, and relaxation activities. These establishments aim to restore tourists' physical and mental health, prevent health problems, or provide relaxation, thus generating more profit and development (Cohen & Bodeker, 2008; Ellis et al., 2020; Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). Consequently, wellness tourism has become widely accepted and recognized by consumers.

History of Wellness Tourism in China

The growth of wellness tourism in China has gone through three stages since 1949: the budding, development, and rapid development.

Firstly, the budding stage occurred from the establishment of New China until the early 1980s, which was also the infancy of China's tourism industry. This period was characterized by convalescent hospitality, primarily through sanatoriums operated by trade unions at various levels within the national system rather than being part of the recreation industry. The most common types were hot spring sanatoriums, forest sanatoriums, coastal lake sanatoriums, and a small number of privately owned nature sanatoriums. By the end of 1982, there were 5,931 sanatoriums across the country, with 87,794 beds (Zou et al., 2021).

Next, the development stage occurred between the mid-1980s and 2011 as China underwent extensive reforms and opened. During this time, tourism and wellness tourism sectors began to grow (Huang & Xu, 2014). The state promoted the wellness industry, and the operating system shifted from public to multiple ownership models. The sector provides integrated services like wellness, vacation, rehabilitation, health care, and medical check-ups. However, wellness tourism primarily catered to older people, with repetitive products and limited national reach, and public awareness of wellness was still low.

As China integrated with the global economy, its social economy rapidly developed, and the market economy matured, creating opportunities for tourism growth. The development approach shifted from rough methods to more intensive development. The domestic wellness tourism industry is diversified and specialized, covering hospitality, real estate, travel, and wellness industries. Related fields also grew, with significant brands actively participating in wellness tourism (Brooker & Joppe, 2014). This sector included hot spring wellness tourism, forest wellness tourism, Chinese medicine wellness tourism, and sports and fitness tourism.

The rapid development stage of China's wellness tourism began in 2012, with Panzhihua leading the way. The wellness industry quickly gained nationwide promotion. Notable

developments included establishing the first wellness tourism office in Hongya County, Sichuan, and creating China's first wellness tourism organization by the Jilin Forestry Group. In 2013, the State Council issued "Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of the Health Service Industry" (Guo Fa [2013] No. 40). In 2016, the National Tourism Administration released the "National Standard for Health and Wellness Tourism Demonstration Bases" (CNTA, 2016). This standard defines wellness tourism as activities that promote body, mind, and spirit harmony through nutritious meals, mental cultivation, and environmental care. The adoption of this standard marked the acceptance of wellness tourism by the national market and its formal recognition by the Chinese government.

While wellness tourism abroad has evolved through spa, therapeutic, and wellness stages, China's wellness tourism reflects changes in the business system since the founding of New China. Despite different origins, the global purpose of wellness tourism is to satisfy the health and relaxation needs of the body, mind, and spirit.

Concept of Wellness Tourism

The Concept of Wellness Tourism Abroad

The concept of wellness tourism was first introduced in academia by Kaspar (1995), who defined it as a subset of health tourism. Despite various definitions in the literature, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) assert that "wellness tourism is still not adequately conceptualized." This study adopts both narrow and broad definitions of wellness tourism.

In a narrow sense, wellness tourism is defined by Mueller and Kaufmann (2001), De la Barre et al. (2005), and Brooker and Joppe (2014), describe it as "the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey and residence by people whose main motive is to preserve or promote their health." These travelers stay in specialized hotels offering professional know-how and individual care, requiring a comprehensive service package that includes physical fitness, beauty care, healthy nutrition, relaxation, meditation, and mental activities. De la Barre et al. (2005) expand this definition to include those whose primary or partial motive is to maintain or promote health and well-being, staying at least one night in facilities specifically designed to enhance physical, psychological, spiritual, and/or social well-being. According to these narrow definitions, wellness tourism is associated with luxury products and five-star hotels where visitors spend at least one night seeking wellness and preventative measures.

Smith and Puczkó (2014) argue that wellness and well-being tourism are closely linked and that a healthy lifestyle is not solely dependent on the conditions provided by luxury hotels. Building on this perspective, research aims to develop a broader, holistic concept of wellness tourism. According to Smith and Kelly (2006), the primary motivations behind wellness tourism are health promotion and maintenance, emphasizing overall health, including physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Consequently, wellness tourism has evolved from a passive escape to a proactive effort by tourists to enhance their health. Ellis et al. (2020) define wellness tourism as travel undertaken by individuals in good health to a domestic or international destination to receive wellness services. These services, offered by the wellness sector, encompass a range of activities to improve overall well-being, as defined by the wellness cluster. Wellness tourists primarily seek accommodation, healthy food, shopping, and other complementary facilities.

Thus, while wellness tourism often involves luxury products and five-star hotels, it is fundamentally driven by a holistic approach to health and well-being, catering to a broader range of needs and preferences beyond traditional hospitality.

The Concept of Wellness Tourism in China

Liqin (2004) was the first to use "wellness" when discussing national forest parks but did not provide additional context. Wang and Gao (2007) later introduced the idea of wellness tourism by combining Chinese "Yang Sheng culture" with the English concept of "wellness." However, due to cultural differences, the Western concept of "wellness tourism" cannot be entirely equated with the Eastern concept of "Yang Sheng tourism," which includes ideas like "the unity of heaven and man," "qi," "yin and yang," and "the five elements." Wang (2009) offered a detailed explanation of wellness tourism, describing it as a form of health tourism that utilizes the natural ecological environment, humanistic environment, and cultural environment to combine ornamental, leisure, recreational, and amusement activities. This aims to achieve life extension, body strengthening, body cultivation, and medical treatment. However, this definition tends to generalize wellness tourism by merging it with health tourism, yang sheng tourism, and medical tourism. The "National Model Base for Wellness Tourism" (LB/T051-2016), officially issued by the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA, 2016) in January 2016, defines wellness tourism as activities that promote health through various means such as fitness, nutritious meals, mental cultivation, and environmental preservation. While adopting this standard indicates broad market and national acceptance of wellness tourism, the use of the term "health and wellness tourism" in its translation broadens the definition of wellness tourism.

The definition of wellness tourism in China remains in flux, with perspectives generally categorized into three views. The motivational view, advocated by scholars like Wang (2009), sees wellness tourism as driven by the pursuit of personal health. The content view, supported by researchers such as Huang and Xu (2018) and Li et al. (2020), focuses on specialized services such as nutrition, fitness, and meditation. The distinguishing view differentiates wellness tourism from recreation, health, and medical tourism, often treating it as a subset of health tourism with links to yang sheng and medical tourism. Table 1 shows the concept of wellness tourism in the three categories in China.

Table: The Concept of Wellness Tourism in China

Author	Year	View	The concept of wellness tourism in China
Wang	2009	Motivation	Wellness tourism is health tourism, a type of tourism activity based on the natural ecological environment, humanistic environment, and cultural environment, combining ornamental, leisure, recreation, and amusement to achieve the goals of life extension, body strengthening, body cultivation, medical treatment, and other related goals.
Qihang and Kai	2015	Motivation	Wellness tourism is an emerging characteristic tourism activity based on an aging population and the increasingly common phenomenon of "sub-

			health" to meet people's needs for health and wellness, relying on an excellent natural ecological environment and a rich health culture, and through the extension of tourism services, to put health in tourism and tourism in health.
Xuanyu	2016	Motivation	Wellness tourism is a special holiday tourism based on suitable weather conditions, in the form of tourism to promote tourism physical and mental health, enhance the happiness of tourists, and achieve happiness for the purpose.
Standard of "National Leisure Tourism Demonstration Base	2016	Content	Wellness tourism enables people to achieve excellent health and fitness through various means, such as health and fitness, nutritious meals, cultivation of the mind and nature, and environmental preservation.
Yurcu et al.	2017	Motivation	Wellness tourism refers to various activities in which visitors leave their homes to visit places that aim to advance their physical and mental health.
Huang and Xu	2018	Content	Wellness tourism is a form of tourism activity in which people prefer to choose a fresh place to enjoy the "wash" of good scenery, avoid places with severe environmental pollution to "wash" the lungs of good air; and "wash" the heart of a good environment; take health physiotherapy, fitness and nutritious meals as a means to achieve the health purpose of nourishing the eyes, body and heart.
Liu et al	2018	Motivation	Wellness tourism is built on the foundation of a healthy ecological environment, with the assistance of specific wellness service facilities, with wellness as the primary tourism goal, away from the permanent residence to another place, through scientific methods in the living environment, activities, diet structure, etc. to make certain adjustments, to coordinate the body and spirit to the natural harmony of the excellent

			state, and then achieve the goal of cultivating the body, strengthening the body.
Zhao and Wang	2019	Content	Wellness tourism is a new type of tourism, which in a broad sense can be understood as the integration of leisure, wellness, and entertainment based on traditional tourism methods and contents so that consumers can enjoy physical fitness, recovery, medical and beauty services in tourism activities.
Chen	2019	Content	Wellness tourism is a kind of tourism activity based on an excellent natural ecological environment, humanistic environment, and cultural environment, with the motive of maintaining health or promoting health as the demand, combining sightseeing, leisure, recreation, holiday, medical treatment, and nurturing, to achieve the purpose of strengthening the body, cultivating the body, medical rehabilitation, and prolonging life, etc.
Li et al.	2020	Distinguishing	Wellness tourism is part of health tourism. Unlike medical tourism, wellness tourists generally stay in specific hotels. They are provided with personalized wellness services, including specialized services such as fitness, exercise, beauty, massage, nutritional meals, relaxation, meditation, and education.
Yang and Shi	2021	Content	Wellness tourism is a high-quality, healthy way of life in which consumers live in wellness destinations for a longer period with the aim of health and wellness and prolonging their lives, guided by the concept of health and wellness and based on a superior human and natural environment. When viewed from a macro perspective, wellness tourism refers to all travel with this objective; when viewed from a micro perspective, health is the objective to be attained through travel, and wellness travel is a type of travel-oriented towards health and happiness. Service recipients include retired seniors, with a focus on combining forms of medicine and health

care, sports and recreation, mental and physical nourishment, and nutritious food.

Source: Author's Own Collation

Conclusion

The historical review of wellness tourism reveals that research began earlier abroad, progressing through three distinct stages: spa, therapeutic, and wellness tourism. The spa, rooted in ancient therapeutic practices, forms the cornerstone of wellness tourism in the West and has been seamlessly integrated into daily health routines. Therapeutic tourism, which emerged post-World War II, is closely linked to social health insurance systems in Western countries. However, it primarily serves the health needs of individuals with specific illnesses, recovering patients, and the elderly, leaving out younger people, general families, and those without obvious medical conditions. In contrast, wellness tourism combines leisure, well-being, and recreational objectives, making it an increasingly popular modern form of travel.

Compared to foreign wellness tourism, China's wellness tourism reflects the evolution of the business system since the founding of New China. Despite different origins, the global purpose of wellness tourism is to satisfy the health and relaxation needs of the body, mind, and spirit. Chinese researchers face conceptual challenges in defining wellness tourism due to its foreign origins and cultural differences that alter the meaning during translation. Terms such as "wellness tourism," "health and wellness tourism," "medical tourism," and "yang sheng tourism" are often used interchangeably, reflecting the ongoing debate and lack of consensus in the field.

Taking into account current domestic and international research, this study defines wellness tourism as a sub-market of health tourism. It differentiates spa, medical, and yang sheng tourism as a tour to a country or a region by people in good health to maintain or improve their well-being and quality of life on a mental, physical, or psychological level while taking advantage of a range of wellness services, including access to lodging, food, shopping, and other ancillary facilities.

Implications

Implications For Theory Development in Tourism Studies

The historical review of wellness tourism offers essential insights for advancing theory in tourism studies by charting the sector's evolution through distinct stages: spa, therapeutic tourism, and wellness tourism. This structured chronology helps frame the development of wellness tourism within broader socio-cultural contexts, emphasizing the need for tourism theories to reflect the fluidity and complexity of evolving tourism sub-sectors.

In Western contexts, integrating wellness practices into everyday health routines indicates that cultural background significantly shapes tourism behaviors and expectations. Theories on wellness tourism should thus incorporate cultural and historical elements to represent tourist motivations and preferences accurately. In China, wellness tourism's unique trajectory, influenced by the nation's business environment and cultural specificities, highlights the

importance of context-specific theoretical frameworks that accommodate diverse global practices and terminologies.

The difficulties Chinese scholars face in defining wellness tourism, given its foreign origins and cultural variances, point to the necessity of flexible theories that can adapt to multiple interpretations. The lack of consensus and ongoing debates about terminology underscores the need for tourism theories to remain dynamic and open to revision as the field matures and diversifies.

Implications for Managerial Practices in the Global Tourism Industry

The historical progression of wellness tourism presents several critical implications for managers in the global tourism sector. Recognizing the distinct stages of wellness tourism allows for developing targeted offerings that cater to specific market segments. For example, spa tourism can be marketed to those seeking luxury and relaxation, therapeutic tourism can serve individuals with health needs, and modern wellness tourism can attract a broad audience focused on holistic well-being.

Understanding the cultural foundations and practices associated with wellness tourism can help managers design culturally resonant and appealing products. In Western contexts, integrating wellness services into daily routines suggests that managers should focus on creating seamless and convenient wellness experiences. In China, where the country's evolving business landscape shapes wellness tourism, managers can develop innovative products that reflect both traditional and contemporary consumer preferences.

The ongoing conceptual and terminological challenges within wellness tourism indicate that managers must prioritize clear and effective communication in their marketing strategies. Clearly defining and differentiating wellness tourism offerings can attract appropriate customer segments and reduce confusion. Staying informed about current research and trends in wellness tourism enables managers to adapt and refine their products to meet changing consumer demands.

Finally, the study's definition of wellness tourism as a subset of health tourism highlights the importance of offering a comprehensive range of services. Managers should consider providing diverse wellness experiences, including lodging, dining, shopping, and other ancillary services, to enhance the overall appeal of their destinations. This holistic approach can help create competitive and attractive wellness tourism destinations that meet the varied needs of travelers seeking physical, mental, and psychological well-being.

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