Evolving Millennial Preferences: the Role of Rural–Based Wellness Tourism in Post–Pandemic Development

การเปลี่ยนแปลงความชอบของคนรุ่นมิลเลนเนียล: บทบาทของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาวะในพื้นที่ชนบทต่อการพัฒนาหลังยุคการแพร่ระบาดโควิด

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolving preferences of millennial travelers in the context of rural–based wellness tourism post–pandemic, highlighting its potential to drive sustainable tourism growth. By surveying 424 international tourists and analyzing literature, the research identifies key attributes of wellness destinations that appeal to millennials, including unique rural locations, indigenous healing practices, and wellness activities like meditation, traditional Thai medicine, and Thai massage. The findings emphasize the importance of integrating local culture, mindfulness activities, and authentic experiences in enhancing millennial engagement. Strategic insights provided by this study offer a roadmap for rural tourism stakeholders to attract and retain millennial tourists, contributing to cultural preservation and sustainable development in post–pandemic travel.

Keywords : rural–based wellness tourism, rural–based wellness tourism destination attributes, millennial travelers, community–based tourism

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้ ศึกษาถึงการเปลี่ยนแปลงความชอบของนักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มมิลเลนเนียลในบริบทของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาวะในพื้นที่ชนบทหลังการระบาดของโควิด–19 โดยมุ่งเน้นถึงศักยภาพในการขับเคลื่อนการเติบโตของการท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน ผลการสำรวจความคิดเห็นนักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติจำนวน 424 คน และการวิเคราะห์วรรณกรรมพบว่า ระบุคุณลักษณะสำคัญของจุดหมายปลายทางการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาวะในพื้นที่ชนบทที่จะสามารถดึงดูดใจนักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มนี้ ได้แก่ สถานที่ในชนบทที่มีเอกลักษณ์เฉพาะตัว แนวทางการรักษาสุขภาพแบบพื้นเมือง และกิจกรรมเพื่อสุขภาพ เช่น การทำสมาธิ การแพทย์แผนไทย และการนวดไทย นอกจากนี้ผลการศึกษาเน้นย้ำให้เห็นถึงความสำคัญของการผสมผสานวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่น กิจกรรมฝึกสติ และประสบการณ์ที่แท้จริงในการส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมของนักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มมิลเลนเนียล โดยข้อมูลเชิงกลยุทธ์จากการศึกษานี้จะเป็นแนวทางสำหรับผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียในการพัฒนาการท่องเที่ยวในพื้นที่ชนบทเพื่อดึงดูดนักท่องเที่ยวใหม่และรักษานักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มเก่านี้ให้กลับมาเที่ยวซ้ำ ซึ่งจะมีส่วนช่วยในการอนุรักษ์วัฒนธรรมและส่งเสริมการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนในยุคหลังการระบาดใหญ่

คำสำคัญ : การท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาวะในพื้นที่ชนบท คุณลักษณะของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาวะในพื้นที่ชนบท นักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มมิลเลนเนียล การท่องเที่ยวโดยชุมชน

Introduction

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the fastest–growing sectors in the global travel industry, with spending increasing steadily each year. In 2017, global wellness tourism reached a valuation of 639 billion USD (GWI, 2017). Despite the disruption caused by the COVID–19 pandemic, the sector demonstrated resilience, rebounding to 880 billion USD in 2023. Looking forward, experts project that by 2034, the market will surge to 2 trillion USD. In Thailand, wellness tourism contributed 7.8 billion USD in 2022, with 10.4 million trips (GWI, 2023), highlighting the rising global demand for wellness–focused travel.

Thailand, blessed with abundant natural resources, traditional medicine, and vibrant cultural heritage, is uniquely positioned to become a leader in rural–based wellness tourism. By leveraging these strengths, the country can meet the growing demand for authentic, experience–driven travel, particularly among millennials. Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, are the largest demographic of travelers today. They prioritize experiences over material goods, actively seeking wellness–focused journeys that offer authenticity and depth. Millennials' use of digital platforms and social media also amplifies the visibility of wellness tourism, as they share and discover new destinations online (Deloitte, 2020; Airbnb, 2022). In the post–pandemic era, millennials are expected to play a critical role in the recovery of the tourism sector, with an increasing focus on wellness and mental health. Rural–based

wellness tourism, offering serene natural environments, healing practices, and cultural engagement, perfectly aligns with millennial preferences for meaningful and immersive travel experiences (Skift, 2021).

This research therefore aims to explore rural–based wellness destination attributes with indigenous wisdom that can support cultural conservation and sustainable development, balancing economic growth with cultural preservation and visitor well–being, especially for millennials.

Proposes

1. To identify the attributes of rural–based wellness destinations that appeal to millennial travelers.

2. To provide recommendations for developing rural–based wellness tourism for millennial engagement and sustainable tourism growth.

Benefits of Research

This research provides significant benefits by addressing the rising demand for wellness tourism, particularly in rural areas of Thailand, which is positioned to become a global leader in this sector. As the wellness tourism market is projected to grow rapidly, understanding the preferences of millennial travelers—who prioritize meaningful, immersive, and wellness–focused experiences—is critical for sustainable tourism development. By identifying the key attributes of rural–based wellness destinations that appeal to millennials, this study offers strategic insights that can support both economic growth and cultural preservation. Additionally, the research promotes the integration of indigenous wisdom and traditional practices into tourism offerings, enhancing cultural conservation while meeting the increasing demand for wellness tourism. This balanced approach not only aids in the recovery of the post–pandemic tourism industry but also contributes to the long–term sustainability of rural communities.

Literature Review

Rural–Based Wellness Tourism

The roots of wellness practices trace back to ancient times, beginning as early as 3000–1500 BC in India with the development of Ayurveda—a holistic system documented in the Vedas that seeks to harmonize body, mind, and spirit through medical treatments, lifestyle practices, and diet (Narayanaswamy, 1981; Tharakan, 2014). Similarly, Traditional Chinese Medicine, originating between 3000 and 2000 BC, integrates Taoist and Buddhist

philosophies to achieve health and well–being, with treatments like herbal medicine, acupuncture, and tai chi still widely practiced today across Asia (Kucukusta & Heung, 2012; Heung & Kucukusta, 2013). In Europe, Hippocrates, an ancient Greek physician around 500 BC, was one of the first to advocate for disease prevention as part of medical practice (Smith & Kelly, 2006). The Romans, influenced by Greek medicine, advanced public health through the development of aqueducts, sewers, and public baths by 50 BC (Miller, 2005; Smith & Kelly, 2006). The modern concept of "wellness" emerged in the 1950s, thanks to the work of physician Halbert L. Dunn, whose ideas gained traction in the 1970s, leading to the creation of wellness models, assessment tools, and the establishment of the first wellness center in the U.S. (Dunn, 1959; Travis, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines wellness as an active process of becoming aware and making choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life, emphasizing that wellness is more than the absence of illness; it is a dynamic process of growth and change, encompassing complete physical, mental, and social well–being. Throughout history, people have traveled for rejuvenation and healing. The Romans utilized baths and hot springs for treatment and spiritual rituals, while in East Asia, the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans traveled to hot springs for relaxation and health benefits (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013; Huang & Xu, 2018; Romão et al., 2018). The modern lifestyle's stress and busyness have increased the demand for wellness tourism, leading providers to design packages that combine travel with wellness activities. Initially centered in Southeast Asia during the 1980s and 1990s, wellness tourism has since expanded globally, with Europe, particularly Switzerland and France, becoming key players in recent years (Koncul, 2012). Wellness tourism is often considered a subset of health tourism, yet the term "health tourism" has been ambiguously defined. Goodrich & Goodrich (1987) describe health tourism as services provided by facilities that deliberately promote their health–care offerings, while Hall (1992) views it through the lens of adventure and sport tourism. It wasn't until Mueller & Kaufmann (2001) that a clear distinction between health tourism and wellness tourism was proposed.

Rural tourism, another concept studied extensively by scholars, was first defined by Bernard Lane in 1994 as tourism that occurs in rural areas. The UNWTO describes it as tourism involving a range of activities related to nature, agriculture, rural lifestyles, culture, and sightseeing (UNWTO, 2021). Rural tourism's five dimensions—location, purpose, activities, scale, and sustainability—have been identified by Nair et al. (2015). The OECD further explains that rural tourism should capitalize on rural characteristics, such as open spaces, proximity to nature, heritage, and traditional practices, while ensuring sustainable development that preserves the rural character and utilizes resources responsibly (OECD,

1994). Rural tourism activities often include participation in rural or rustic lifestyles, which can range from touring and cultural activities to wellness, water, aerial, passive, and sporting activities (Hurma et al., 2016; Haldar, 2018). While wellness tourism can occur in both urban and rural areas, it frequently takes place in rural settings, where nature experiences are vital to well–being (Pesonen & Komppula, 2010).

The author hence defines "rural–based wellness tourism" as a destination in a rural area that offers wellness activities based on local wisdom, culture and way of life to tourists. It is a mode of travel to improve physical and mental wellbeing, spiritual awareness, longevity, beauty and a connection with the community, local wisdom, nature, and local belief in rural areas such as in villages.

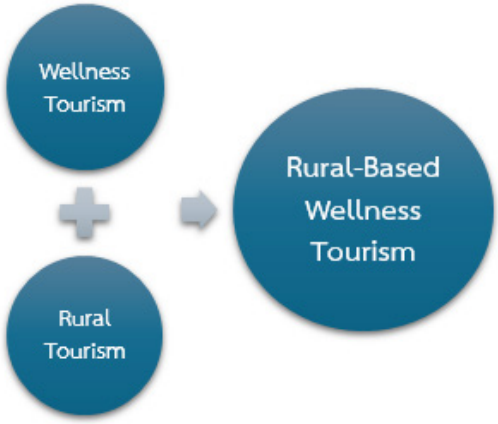


Figure 1 Rural–Based Wellness Tourism
Source: Adapted by researcher (2024)

In conclusion, Thailand's rural–based wellness tourism is a powerful combination of cultural, spiritual, and natural heritage. The integration of traditional practices like Thai massage, meditation, and herbal medicine with modern tourism infrastructure offers a holistic wellness experience. By merging ancient wisdom with contemporary wellness trends, Thailand has positioned itself as a global leader in wellness tourism, providing immersive experiences that promote personal well–being and cultural engagement while preserving its cultural and natural legacy.

The Attributes of Rural–Based Wellness Tourism Destination

Wellness tourism destinations are a combination of both tangible and intangible assets. Dryglas & Salamaga (2017) use destination attributes to determine the image of spa resorts and the nature of segments. Based on destination attributes and relevant socio–demographic

characteristics, three distinct segments of Polish visitors to spa resorts were identified. Whilst, a study of American tourists' preferences shows that destinations should highlight rich natural and cultural resources and provide opportunities to engage with local people and create community (Lusby, 2015). Meanwhile, scholars suggest that wellness tourism infrastructure that encourages well–being should be distinguished from a general destination's tourist facilities and services (Voigt et al., 2011), and beneficial characteristics of a wellness tourism destination in terms of the psychological aspects of travel have been analyzed (Uysal et al., 2016). Studies of the importance and impact of attributes of wellness destination tourism, which affect the competitiveness of tourism destinations, have been conducted by using online surveys to allow destination managers and tourism researchers to evaluate thirty–six competitiveness attributes, and those attributes are then categorized into 5 groups, which are 1) essential resources and attractors; 2) supporting factors and resources; 3) destination policy, planning, and development; 4) destination management; and 5) qualifying and amplifying determinants (Crouch, 2010).

Didaskalou et al. (2009) conduct a study on wellness tourism in Greece and find that climate and existing tourism development attractions are key attributes of wellness destinations. Lee et al. (2009) studies wellness tourists at hot spring attractions in Taiwan and identifies seven attributes, which are 1) safety and security; 2) transport infrastructure; 3) leisure and recreation; 4) food; 5) accommodation; 6) cultural heritage; and 7) natural resources. A study is conducted to investigate hiking as a wellness activity in Portugal, and the result identifies eight attributes, including 1) information on the walking trails; 2) guiding; 3) interpretation; 4) lack of crowds; 5) peace; 6) waste management and garbage bins along the trails; 7) low difficulty hiking trails; and 8) support. Ravichandran & Suresh (2010) study wellness services in India and find that important attributes are 1) uniqueness; 2) prevention; 3) holistic services; and 4) thematic setting. The study by Heung & Kucukusta (2013) in China identifies three important attributes of a destination, which are 1) environment and safety; 2) supporting facilities; and 3) health facilities. A study by Kelly (2012) in Europe finds that 1) the place; 2) the activities; and 3) the intangible retreat experience are important attributes for European wellness tourism destinations. A study conducted by Medina–Muñoz & Medina–Muñoz (2014a) identifies attributes of wellness destinations that tourists give priority to when they are selecting a destination for wellness vacations. Those attributes identified as important are health facilities and wellness centers. Natural and cultural attractions, including landscape, fresh air and clean water, hot springs, a peaceful setting, a safe and relaxing atmosphere, local culture, or historical heritage, are considered important as well. The study shows that the factors that are perceived by tourists as important are 1) the natural

conditions of the destination and the relaxing environment of the hotel; 2) differentiation based on personalized and professional attention; and 3) the attractiveness of the offer of wellness treatments and centers. A study of health and wellness tourism in India by Tharakan (2014) identifies four important attributes, which are 1) prevention; 2) natural/rural setting; 3) standard of service; and 4) prerequisite of infrastructure. Han et al. (2017) studies the spa industry in Thailand and finds that unique services, such as Thai massage spas, and the performance of Thai wellness spas, such as the quality of treatment, variety of service options (improved service quality), price, therapist and service staff, and facilities, are two key attributes. The latest study by Koskinen & Wilska (2018) in Finland identifies attributes important to spa tourists, which are 1) prevention activities; 2) holistic services; and 3) landscape of location. Attributes of wellness tourism destinations for this study will be strictly those available in rural areas of Thailand. Attributes are divided into four aspects consisting of the area aspect, the tourism aspect, the type of wellness service aspect, and the wellness service or activity or therapy aspect. Table 1 shows a list of attributes selected for this study, a total of 38 attributes.

Table 1 Summary of Rural–based Wellness Tourism Attributes from Literature

Dimensions	Attributes	References
Area Aspect	Climate, Attractions, Safety, Infrastructure, Natural Resources, Visitor Density, Atmosphere, Support Service, Uniqueness, Facilities, Attractiveness, Quality of Service, Enough Wellness Personnel, Pleasant Setting	Didaskalou et al. (2009); Lee et al. (2009); Rodrigues et al. (2010); Ravichandran & Suresh (2010); Heung & Kucukusta (2013); Medina–Muñoz & Medina–Muñoz (2014b); Tharakan (2014); Han et al. (2018); Kanittinsuttitong (2018)
Tourism Aspect	Activities, Food, Accommodation, Culture, Guiding Service and Interpretation, Experience	Lee et al. (2009); Rodrigues et al. (2010); Kelly (2012)
Type of Wellness Service	Holistic Service, Partial Service	Ravichandran & Suresh (2010); Koskinen & Wilska (2018)
Wellness Service/ Activity/ Therapy	Herbal Spa, Hot Spring, Detox Therapy, Traditional Thai Medicine, Thai Massage, Muay Thai, Clay Therapy, Mud Therapy, Juice Therapy, Sand Therapy, Sauna Therapy, Meditation, Art Therapy, Music Therapy, Painting Therapy, Trekking Retreat	Didaskalou et al. (2009); Lee et al. (2009); Ravichandran & Suresh (2010); Rodrigues et al. (2010); Kelly (2012); Heung & Kucukusta (2013); Tharakan (2014); Jagyasi (2015); Han et al. (2018); Kanittinsuttitong (2018); Koskinen & Wilska (2018)

Source: Adapted by researcher (2024)

Millennials Generation in Rural–Based Wellness Tourism

Millennials, born between 1980 and 1996, are the largest generation globally, making up 31.5% of the world's population, with significant spending power, particularly in the United States, where it is estimated at $200 billion (Cheng, 2019; Dimock, 2019). This generation is characterized by their social consciousness, technological savvy, ethnic diversity, and optimism. They value experiences and ethical spending, are highly educated, health–conscious, financially aware, and spiritually inclined (Smith & Nichols, 2015; Cheng, 2019). Growing up with the internet and social media, millennials are deeply engaged with technology, which influences their social awareness and responsibility. They are inclined to spend on ethical experiences, including ecotourism, and strive to reduce their carbon footprint. Their diverse backgrounds contribute to their open–mindedness and their ability to form connections across different cultures and ethnicities. Millennials prioritize experiences over material possessions, often documenting and sharing their travels on social media as a way to showcase their adventures and connect with others (Newman, 2015; Cheng, 2019). Millennial travelers prefer immersive and adventurous trips, particularly to destinations that offer unique cultural experiences and new environments. This preference aligns with their values of seeking out the new and the unique and their desire to explore places that are less known or visited by their peers. They are more likely to choose destinations they locate online and share these experiences on social media as a form of social proof and personal fulfillment (Veiga et al., 2017; Cavagnaro et al., 2018; Escandon–Barbosa et al., 2020). Hritz et al. (2014) categorized millennial wellness travelers into five groups: Escapers, After Hours, Amenity Seekers, Most Unwell, and Most Well. Escapers travel to break away from routine, After Hours travelers seek nightlife, Amenity Seekers look for outdoor activities and fitness, and most unwell travelers prefer physical activities and adventure without focusing on wellness, while most well travelers are highly engaged in wellness activities and enjoy socializing, learning, and seeking new experiences during their travels.

Research Methodology

This study investigates the preferences and behaviors of international independent tourists with a focus on rural-based wellness tourism destinations. Using a structured questionnaire and a purposive sampling approach, the research aims to identify key attributes of wellness tourism destinations that appeal to travelers. The data collected offer valuable insights into the factors shaping tourist experiences and contribute to the understanding of destination development in the context of wellness tourism.

Population and Sample

The study focused on international independent tourists who visited or were visiting Thailand during the data collection period, spanning from August 2022 to May 2023. To ensure a representative sample, Yamane's Sample Size Formula (1967) was used to determine the sample size. A purposive sampling method was applied, selecting participants based on specific criteria, which is their travel experience in Chiang Mai, Ubon Ratchathani, Prachinburi, Prachuab Khirikhan, and Krabi. This strategy led to the successful gathering of 424 valid responses.

Instruments

The primary research instrument for the quantitative component was a structured questionnaire. A thorough literature review identified 38 observable variables related to rural–based wellness tourism destination attributes. After conducting an Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC) assessment, two additional variables were incorporated, bringing the total number of observable variables to 40. A pilot study, involving 102 participants, was conducted to refine the instrument. Based on the results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) from the pilot data, 6 observable variables were removed, leaving a final set of 34 variables in the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive data analysis and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Descriptive statistics provided quantitative summaries of the collected data, offering insights into the key characteristics of the sample population (Fink, 2015). EFA was then utilized to explore underlying relationships between the observed variables and to identify latent constructs that represent rural–based wellness tourism destination attributes (Fabrigar & Wegener, 2011).

Research Results

The largest demographic group in the study is the "25–34" age range, accounting for 30.4% of respondents, highlighting a strong presence of young adults in rural–based wellness tourism. This is followed by the "18–24" and "55–64" age groups, which also represent significant portions of the sample, suggesting a balanced mix of younger and middle–aged travelers. In contrast, the "<18" and ">75" age groups are underrepresented, each contributing only 2.0% of respondents. Notably, the ">75" category includes just one individual, skewing the percentage slightly.

Business owners (21%) and students (15%) together comprise 36% of the sample, representing a key demographic, particularly millennials. This group, consisting of young entrepreneurs and students, reflects the millennial generation's preference for experiences

that emphasize wellness, sustainability, and authentic cultural engagement. Millennials are known for their pursuit of transformative travel experiences, making them an important segment for rural-based wellness tourism development. Compared to other demographic groups, such as retirees or government employees, business owners demonstrate greater dynamism in terms of decision–making, innovation, and economic impact. This group is pivotal in shaping future developments in the sector, as engaging them effectively can enhance economic resilience and foster adaptability to changing market conditions.

The gender distribution shows that females (32%) outnumber males (22%) in the sample, a factor that could influence gender–specific preferences in wellness tourism and travel behaviors. Understanding these gender dynamics is critical for tailoring wellness tourism offerings that appeal to female travelers, who may prioritize specific aspects of wellness and relaxation.

Rural–based wellness tourism destination attributes are analyzed with Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis together with the Varimax rotation method. That means examining the matrix of correlations among the factors to see if any of them are larger than 0.5. Indicators having a loading below 0.5 are eliminated from analysis. In this process, eigenvalues for all items are determined not to be less than 1.00. The total number of variables before being tested with EFA was 34, and all variables remain organized into 6 components.

The factor validity investigated by EFA is satisfactorily assured by the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity values. The KMO of 0.802 demonstrates acceptable sampling adequacy. A minimum acceptable KMO score for this test is 0.6 (Glen, 2016). Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant (0.00), signifying that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and concerned variables are correlated. The indicators thus show appropriateness for factor structure detection. The reliability of the 34–item scale examined using Cronbach's alpha yields a score of 0.898. Cronbach's alpha with a value greater than 0.6 is acceptable and regarded as good when the value exceeds 0.8. The value equal to or greater than 0.6 is suggested as a cut–off point by Hair (2006). The factor structure of rural–based wellness tourism destination attributes detected by the EFA is shown in Table 2 with reliability scores of each component.

Through Principal Component Analysis (PCA), nine components were identified with eigenvalues ranging from 1.082 to 6.751. These components explained between 3.183% and 19.857% of the variance, with a cumulative variance explanation of 59.167%. Consistent with the principles of factor analysis, only factors with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1 were retained (Ardhala et al., 2016).

Table 2 Components Extracted from Rural–Based Wellness Tourism Destination Attributes

Items	Loading	α
Uniqueness Dimension		**0.798**
Uniqueness	.642	
Attractiveness	.704	
Quality of Service	.593	
Pleasant Setting	.722	
Accommodation	.644	
Local Culture	.543	
Partial Service	.636	
Facilities Dimension		**0.791**
Support Service	.521	
Facilities	.606	
Enough Wellness Personnel	.501	
Food	.575	
Guiding Service and Interpretation	.712	
Infrastructure	.699	
Activities Dimension		**.767**
Meditation Learning	.586	
Art Therapy	.815	
Painting Therapy	.760	
Traditional Thai Medicine	.637	
Muay Thai	.751	
Animal Therapy	.824	
Volunteering	.855	
Attractions Dimension		**0.700**
Attractions	.626	
Tourism Activities	.822	
Natural Setting Dimension		**0.745**
Climate	.627	
Clay Therapy	.584	
Visitor Density	.866	
Atmosphere	.618	

Table 2 Components Extracted from Rural–Based Wellness Tourism Destination Attributes (continued)

Items	Loading	α
Wellness Therapy Dimension		**0.927**
Juice Therapy	.833	
Sand Therapy	.642	
Thermal Bath Therapy	.774	
Mud Therapy	.507	
Herbal Spa	.538	
Sauna	.818	
Tourism Experience	.664	
Holistic Service	.900	

Source: Adapted by researcher (2024)

The findings from the EFA provide a comprehensive understanding of the attributes that contribute to the success of rural–based wellness tourism destinations in Thailand. The six identified components—Uniqueness, Facilities, Activities, Attractions, Natural Setting, and Wellness Therapy—offer valuable insights for stakeholders involved in the development and promotion of wellness tourism. By focusing on these key dimensions, destination managers can design holistic, unique, and well–equipped wellness tourism experiences that cater to the diverse preferences of international tourists.

The EFA results underscore the multidimensional nature of rural–based wellness tourism. The strong presence of younger, entrepreneurial travelers and the emphasis on unique experiences and diverse therapeutic offerings position wellness tourism as a growing segment with significant potential for sustainable development in rural areas. Future strategies should aim to enhance these attributes while maintaining the balance between tourism development and the preservation of natural and cultural resources.

Conclusion

The study identifies six key attributes of rural-based wellness tourism destinations—Uniqueness, Facilities, Activities, Attractions, Natural Setting, and Wellness Therapy—that significantly shape the tourist experience. These attributes align closely with the preferences of millennial travelers, a group that forms a substantial portion of the sample, particularly business owners and students. Millennials are known for seeking authentic, wellness–

oriented experiences that are sustainable and culturally immersive. The appeal of these destinations to millennials lies in their distinctiveness, environmental connection, and a diverse range of activities that foster physical, mental, and emotional well–being. Millennial travelers, with their focus on personal development, sustainability, and meaningful travel experiences, are particularly drawn to the unique and immersive aspects of rural wellness tourism. The emphasis on natural settings, wellness therapies, and culturally rooted activities resonates with their values, making this demographic a key driver for the future success of rural wellness destinations.

Proposed Development Strategy for Attracting Millennial Travelers to Rural–Based Wellness Tourism Destination

To attract millennial travelers and ensure the sustainable development of rural–based wellness tourism destinations, the following strategies are proposed:

Leveraging Local Culture and Authentic Experiences: Millennials are attracted to experiences that offer a deep connection with local culture. Incorporating traditional practices, local cuisine, and community–led tourism initiatives can provide the authentic cultural engagement millennials seek. Highlighting unique aspects of local traditions within wellness activities—such as traditional Thai medicine or local art therapies—enhances the destination's appeal.

Community Involvement and Economic Development: Engaging local communities in tourism activities fosters sustainable economic development and enhances the authenticity of the tourist experience. Millennial travelers prefer to see that their tourism dollars contribute to the well–being of local residents. This can be achieved through initiatives like community–led workshops or volunteer programs that enable tourists to contribute to local sustainability efforts.

Enhanced Personalization and Wellness Offerings: Develop a wide array of wellness activities such as meditation, traditional therapies, and volunteer programs that appeal to millennials' desire for personalized and transformative experiences. Offering customizable wellness packages will cater to their preference for flexibility and individualized travel.

Integration of Sustainability Practices: Millennials value sustainability and environmentally conscious travel. Rural–based wellness tourism destinations should integrate eco–friendly practices, such as using locally sourced materials, promoting conservation efforts, and offering low–impact tourism options. This can be supported through activities like organic farming workshops, eco-friendly accommodations, and carbon–offset programs.

Digital Engagement and Marketing: This group is highly active online and influenced by digital content. Rural–based wellness tourism destination managers should invest in digital marketing strategies, including social media campaigns, influencer partnerships, and immersive virtual experiences. Providing platforms where millennials can share their experiences can enhance word–of–mouth marketing and promote the destination's uniqueness.

Infrastructure and Accessibility: Ensuring high–quality infrastructure that is both convenient and sustainable is essential for attracting millennials, who value comfort but also expect minimal environmental impact. Modern facilities, support services, and easy accessibility to wellness sites, coupled with eco–friendly transportation options, can make rural wellness destinations more attractive.

To ensure the sustainable development of rural–based wellness tourism destinations, it is crucial to align the attributes with the expectations of millennial travelers. By enhancing wellness offerings, integrating sustainability, promoting local culture, and leveraging digital platforms, rural wellness destinations in Thailand can attract this influential demographic while contributing to long–term economic growth and the preservation of local resources. This holistic model not only caters to the preferences of millennial tourists but also ensures that rural–based wellness tourism develops sustainably, benefiting both visitors and local communities alike.

Recommendation

Theoretical Implications: This study introduces new rural–based wellness tourism destination attributes to the existing rural tourism theory, particularly from the perspective of millennial travel segmentation. These findings provide valuable insights into the emotional and behavioral responses of millennial tourists, emphasizing the need for further research on developing rural–based wellness tourism that aligns with millennial characteristics and preferences.

Practical Implications: Understanding the attributes that enhance millennials' experiences in rural–based wellness tourism can help destination developers and stakeholders better integrate indigenous wisdom into tourism activities. This approach will be crucial in meeting the growing demand from millennial tourists, potentially shaping the future of wellness tourism practices and destination development.

Social Implications: Developing wellness tourism in rural areas supports the promotion and preservation of traditional wisdom and cultures, particularly indigenous wellness therapies. These elements are vital for the successful development of rural–based wellness tourism for millennials.

Research Limitations: This study's data collection focused solely on young independent tourists in rural wellness destinations. Future research should include tourists traveling with organized tours to broaden the market segmentation for rural wellness tourism development.

Further Study: While the attributes of rural–based wellness tourism destinations are crucial for their development, it is equally important to examine how these attributes relate to other key constructs, such as memorable tourism experiences.

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