

THE EVOLUTION AND FUTURE OF WELLNESS TOURISM: A TWO-PHASE REVIEW AND A SIX-DIMENSIONAL THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

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Although wellness tourism has received increasing interest from researchers and practitioners alike, the relevant research has been scattered and lacked a comprehensive understanding of its development. To fill this gap this study combines the existing research findings to track the development of wellness tourism research and explore the emerging opportunities via the perspectives of wellness dimensions. A two-phase methodological literature review combining bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review was conducted on 214 relevant Scopus-indexed articles published between 2001 and 2024. The bibliometric analysis, based on authors' keywords, reveals three timelines in research development and evolution: an early focus on foundational and medical-based wellness concepts (2001–2010), a transition toward destination marketing and segmentation (2011–2019), and a recent emphasis on consumer experience and digital wellness (2020–2024). The systematic review identifies six wellness dimensions: nutrition and healthy eating, wellness education, mental and meditation, spa and massage, beauty and personal care, and physical fitness emerging as notably under-researched areas. This study contributes to the field by integrating wellness dimensions with wellness tourism research and offering a structured framework for future inquiry. This study focuses on wellness tourism research and its dimensions and the wellness tourism economy. Additionally, it is the only study employing a two-phase methodology focused explicitly on mapping the wellness research evolution and identifying gaps across six wellness dimensions.

Keywords: Wellness tourism; wellness dimensions; bibliometric analysis; systematic literature review

1. INTRODUCTION

Health and well-being are two crucial components impacting human life. While the health concept encompasses physical (body strength and ability, free from disease) and mental (mind strength and capability) that allows us to navigate daily life without excessive stress, frustration, anxiety, or sadness, the well-being concept includes preserving physical, mental, and emotional stability and balance, rather than the absence of

illness (Wooll, 2021). Past research identifies different types of health-related travel for medical, wellness, and therapeutic reasons (Campra et al., 2022; Polat & Koseoglu, 2023; Smith & Puczkó, 2015). Moreover, health travel and tourism refer to a global movement to promote physical, mental, and emotional health through medical and healthy life-based activities, aiming to increase individuals' capacity to meet their needs and perform better in their environment and society. Therefore, health tourism encompasses wellness tourism, such as thermal, spa, spiritual, healthy food, and physical fitness, and medical tourism, such as treatment and surgery (Dini & Pencarelli, 2022; GWI, 2022; Majeed & Gon Kim, 2023).

While the blurred context between health, medical, and wellness tourism still exist (Majeed & Gon Kim, 2023; Majeed et al., 2017), aligned with Lee and Kim (2015), the Global Wellness Institute (GWI, 2023) divides the health tourism into two distinct types; namely, 1) medical tourism which involves tourists who passively travel for the treatment of various diseases or cosmetic surgery which involves invasive techniques for treatment (Global Spa Summit, 2011) and 2) wellness tourism which includes tourists who actively travel in search of rejuvenation and enhancing their health and well-being through various non-invasive techniques or holistic approaches focusing on preventing diseases, adjusting lifestyles, and using modern medical technology to improve overall well-being and prevent disease (Dunn, 1959; Hettler, 1976). Therefore, this study adopts the scope of wellness tourism provided by GWI (2018) and WHO (2024) that refers to the travel aiming to actively preserve or improve well-being, wellness and healthy life.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted public awareness of healthcare, attracted public attention and increased well-being awareness. The consequences elevated the Global Wellness Economy's growth and evolution. GWI (2023) defines the wellness economy as any goods and services that promote daily health and wellness activities and lifestyles such as mental health, nutrition, alternative medicines, beauty, personal care, and fitness. GWI (2022) predicted the global economy value to rise from 4.3 trillion USD in 2020 to around 7.0 trillion USD in 2025 (an average 10% annual growth). Because of the well-being, rejuvenation, transformation and longevity trends, GWI (2023) expected an average growth rate of 21% in wellness tourism annually. Hence, health related tourism businesses are anticipated to expand more than other tourism businesses. Apart from the contribution of the public wellness recognition, the new work-life balance trend of "bleisure" (business plus leisure), "workations" (working vacations), or "work from anywhere" (the capacity to work from anywhere) plays a part in this notable development (Jacobs, 2023).

Despite extensive academic research in wellness tourism, it is rather scattered. In addition, the classification of wellness dimensions is still inconsistent as past wellness tourism research encompasses many various dimensions, such as physical, mental, spiritual, and environmental wellness. Since several gaps exist between academic research and industry practices and within the industry, this study proposes six wellness dimensions derived from past academic research and industry reports (e.g., GWI, 2022; Hettler, 1976; ICAA, 2024). These gaps include a lack of integration among wellness practices, limited accessibility for individuals with disabilities and those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and insufficient cultural sensitivity in offerings. Additionally, many programs overlook mental health support and often lack evidence-based practices, leading to uncertainty for consumers. The industry also tends to adopt a one-size-fits-all or mass approach, with inadequate personalization, while regulatory standards are generally lacking. Furthermore, there is a need for greater consumer education and better technology integration, such as wellness tracking apps. Addressing these gaps could enhance the wellness tourism experience, making it more inclusive and effective for a wider wellness tourist (GWI, 2022; Martins et al., 2025; Smith & Puczkó, 2014; UNWTO & ETC, 2018).

Due to its complexity and diverse tourists' expectations and perceptions of wellness tourism (Majeed & Gon Kim, 2023), it needs further research. Although wellness tourism research has been studied widely and broadly (Kazakov & Oyner, 2021; Polat & Koseoglu, 2023; Wang et al., 2021), the structural reviews are still inadequate (Polat & Koseoglu, 2023, p. 1861). Additionally, multiple researchers have conducted literature reviews in health-related tourism studies (e.g., Majeed & Gon Kim, 2023), they mainly focus on medical tourism (Liu et al., 2022; Polat & Koseoglu, 2023; Zhong et al., 2021). However, there has yet to be a comprehensive literature review in wellness tourism studies (Polat & Koseoglu, 2023, p. 1861), especially with a combination of a systematic literature review and a bibliometric analysis based on wellness dimensions. Based on the significance of the above and the theoretical gaps, we formulated two central research questions: RQ1: What has been studied and evolved in wellness tourism research? and RQ2: What are the research gaps and emerging opportunities based on wellness dimensions? Using a bibliometric analysis through keyword analysis, this study aims to provide comprehensive insights into the evolution of wellness tourism research and identify literature gaps and emerging opportunities in wellness tourism studies and practices by using six wellness dimensions in a systematic literature review. Methodologically, this study is one of a few studies conducting a combined approach of bibliometric analysis and systematic literature reviews in wellness tourism studies. It also extends Polat and Koseoglu's (2023) citation and co-citation analysis through a bibliometric analysis by

analyzing keywords and providing the research evolution in wellness tourism studies in three periods. This study also supplements Dini and Pencarelli's (2022) ten wellness tourism offer system components by identifying six wellness dimensions as bases to conduct a systematic literature review and augmenting the clearer research gaps and directions for future studies to interested scholars and relevant practitioners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Literature review study approaches in wellness tourism studies

Due to its attractive growth and substantial attention from scholars and practitioners, 18 literature review approaches have been conducted in wellness tourism studies, such as scoping, conceptual, and systematic literature reviews, and bibliometric analyses in recent years. Out of these 18 studies, there are eight bibliometric analyses, four literature reviews, two studies that combined the bibliometric analyses and literature reviews, one conceptual review, and three scoping reviews. Most bibliometric analyses were conducted using studies from two main databases: Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, for which six out of eight bibliometric analyses used only one database. Interestingly, the conceptual, scoping, and literature reviews used more than one database. Although these studies focused on wellness tourism, they were disparate determinants. For example, Babu N and Abraham (2024)'s bibliometric analysis focused on religious-spiritual and wellness tourism research and provided descriptive analysis of reference publication year spectroscopy, and network analysis. Dahanayake et al. (2023) systematic review and bibliometric analysis focused on memorable tourism experience (MTE) studies in wellness tourism. Dini and Pencarelli (2022)'s literature review reveals ten components of the wellness tourism offer system: hot springs, spas, care of body and mind, medical tourism, natural environment, spirituality, culture, enogastronomy, sports, and events.

This study intends to extend the health-related travel literature bibliometric analysis of Polat and Koseoglu (2023) by analyzing keywords in wellness tourism studies. It will complement Dini and Pencarelli's (2022) holistic perspective on wellness tourism offer system components by identifying six wellness dimensions as bases for a systematic literature review.

2.2 Incorporating wellness measurement dimensions and wellness economies into wellness tourism dimensions

Past studies discovered a variety of wellness tourism dimensions. The development of wellness dimensions over the years, as reflected in the work of various researchers across diverse cultural settings, has increased awareness of the factors that contribute to it. Some of the early theories developed by researchers such as Dunn (1959), Hettler (1976, 1980), Liao et al. (2023) and the National Wellness Institute (NWI) (2020) provide a basic set of wellness dimensions that continue to be developed and modified in response to the evolving needs of society. The current dimensions of wellness being incorporated from 7 to 12 dimensions of wellness that encompass financial, digital, and various elements of wellness contribute to its growing understanding of wellness being comprehensively observed across society (ICAA, 2024; Gawlik et al., 2024; Hattie et al., 2004; Melnyk & Neale, 2018; Roddick, 2016; Simon, 2013; Stoewen, 2017; Zendell, 2023). These dimensions reflect the evolving wellness concept and the increasing integration of its various components to create a comprehensive understanding. The widely used concept of wellness dimensions draws on the six dimensions developed by Hettler (1976), comprise Social, Physical, Emotional, Spiritual, Intellectual, and Occupational wellness.

As people continue to recognize the significance of wellness, it continues to grow. It is the economic sector that delivers wellness-promoting consumer goods and services. It comprises a myriad of sectors that make up the global economy's wellness industry. The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) (2023) also defines the wellness economy as the industries in which consumers can incorporate wellness practices and behaviors in their day-to-day living. It comprises the following eleven sectors: Personal Care & Beauty (\$1,089 billion), Healthy Eating, Nutrition & Weight Loss (\$1,079 billion), Physical Activity (\$976 billion), Wellness Tourism (\$651 billion), Public Health, Prevention & Personalized Medicine (\$611 billion), Traditional & Complementary Medicine (\$519 billion), Wellness Real Estate (\$398 billion), Mental Wellness (\$181 billion), Spas (\$105 billion), Workplace Wellness (\$51 billion), and Thermal/Mineral Springs (\$46 billion).

The existing literature has identified various wellness tourism dimensions and economies, such as food and healthy eating habits, wellness education, mental and meditation practices, spa and massage therapy, beauty and personal care routines, and physical fitness, all of which are linked to the six wellness tourism dimensions. Supported by the GWI (2023), the wellness's economic prospects are realized in innovative investment and its contribution in a healthier and more prosperous society. Therefore, this study proposes to incorporate the wellness dimensions with tourism economies to comprehend the understanding of wellness tourism more efficiently. Furthermore, to contribute to a clearer understanding of these differences and

similarities, this study adopts the six wellness dimensions identified by Hettler (1976), UNWTO and ETC (2018), and the wellness economies (GWI, 2022) to identify the six wellness tourism dimensions for the elucidation and investigation of this research.

3. METHODS

Former studies highlight the challenge of selecting appropriate study designs, noting that the choice of methodology can significantly impact the validity and reliability of findings (e.g., Johnson & Christensen, 2019). This study applied a two-phase methodological literature review approach (Dahanayake et al., 2023; Polat & Koseoglu, 2023) to address the research questions and aims. In the first phase, this study conducted a bibliometric analysis to explore the updated knowledge in wellness tourism to identify the research gaps. A systematic literature review was conducted to further explore emerging opportunities in wellness tourism dimensions and fill the gaps in the intellectual structure of WT literature in the second phase.

Using PRISMA guidelines for article collection, the team discussed the study scope and coverage and agreed to search for the related articles on one database; Scopus, due to the limitation of the R Studio software that allowed only one database analysis. In addition, past research evidenced using one database is sufficient (e.g., Babu N & Abraham, 2024; Dini & Pencarelli, 2022; Mohanan & Shekhar, 2022; Polat & Koseoglu, 2023; Phuthong et al., 2023; Sangpikul, 2023). In the Identification Step of PRISMA guidelines, the researchers separately search for articles on Scopus database, using relevant keywords and related keywords of wellness tourism dimensions such as “wellness tourism, wellness, health tourism, medical tourism, well-being, spa, health, health care, spas, health and wellness tourism, health services, yoga, well-being, spa tourism, spirituality, wellness destination, thermal spring, yoga tourism, wellness tourists, retreat, personal health, hot spring, health consciousness, happiness”, and compare the search result to validate the search process. The initial search included 279 articles. After three screening rounds of (1) duplication, (2) title, abstract, and keywords, and (3) full texts for eligibility and inclusion in the Screening, Eligibility and Inclusion Steps of PRISMA guidelines, the team included 214 articles in this study for further analyses (See Table 1).

Using the author keyword in the Biblioshiny R Studio program, the first data analysis discovered the updated research evolution and gaps in wellness tourism. In the systematic literature review phase, the research team manually conducted the second data analysis by employing the identified six wellness tourism dimensions as an analytical framework to address gaps in the fragmented wellness tourism literature. This approach offers a coherent structure to synthesize diverse themes and identify underexplored areas, linking practical wellness domains with theoretical foundations to reveal emerging research opportunities in wellness tourism.

Table 1: Articles collection, screening and inclusion

Identification	Topic	Wellness tourism
	Scope & coverage	Database: Scopus Date searched: March 31, 2024 Search field: Article title, abstract, keywords Time frame: Unlimited (until 31 March 2024) Selected journal articles in English language only Subject areas: Business and social sciences Keywords: Wellness tourism, wellness, health tourism, medical tourism, wellbeing, spa, health, health care, spas, health and wellness tourism, health services, yoga, wellbeing, spa tourism, spirituality, wellness destination, thermal spring, yoga tourism, wellness tourists, retreat, personal health, hot spring, health consciousness, happiness.
Screening	Date extracted	April 1–30, 2024, n = 279
	Studies screened	Article identified & screened (title, abstract, keywords) Studies excluded (n = 13)
	Studies assessed for eligibility	Record removed (full-text screening) n = 42 Retracted article (n = 1) No access to full text (n = 4) Not related to search criteria (n = 45) Sample populations are patients (sickness) (n = 2)
	Articles included in the review	n = 214

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Thematic evolution

This section presents the findings from a bibliometric analysis using keywords on wellness tourism research evolution to answer RQ1. In Figure 1, thematic evolution analysis was based on co-word network analysis and clustering. We analyzed the maximum, i.e., 214 studies, and chose the inclusion index weighted by word occurrence as the weighting index. Through multiple analyses, we decided to apply three cutting clusters: 2001–2010, 2011–2019, and 2020–2024 for a clearer overall thematic evolution. During 2001–2010, the early period was characterized by broad, foundational themes such as health tourism, wellness, wellness tourism, and health and wellness tourism, suggesting the initial stage of research focused on establishing definitions and scope for the field. In the second time slice from 2011 to 2019, the health and wellness tourism theme splits into more specific sub-topics. Wellness tourism emerges as a distinct theme, alongside spas, well-being, and health tourism, and the introduction of China as a geographic focus indicates a period of diversification and growth in the research, with attention to particular aspects and markets for wellness tourism. Lastly, the 2020–2024 time slice indicates a further evolution and specialization of themes, where wellness tourism remains prominent, while health and wellness tourism re-emerges as an overarching concept. Wellness, spa tourism, and satisfaction have emerged as new themes, indicating the continuing development that potentially emphasized on the consumer experience and industry performance.

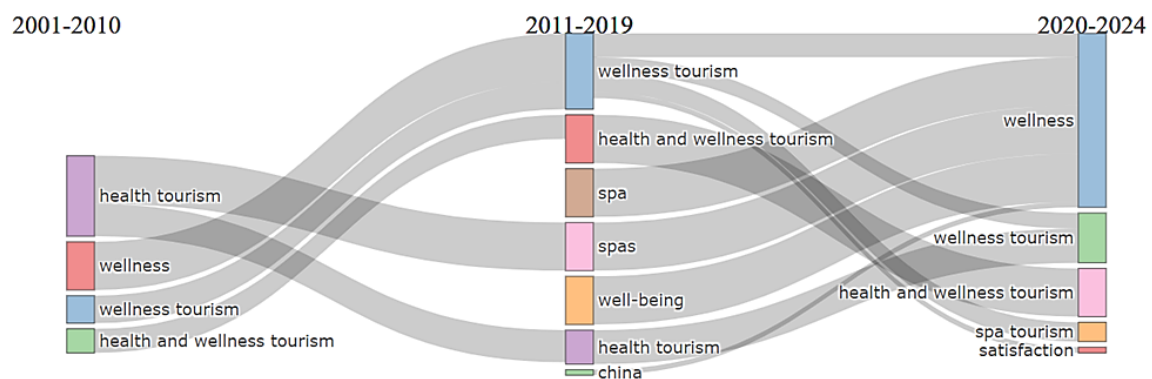


Figure 1: Thematic evolution

Figure 2 demonstrates the major themes in each time slice, for which we have compiled a thematic map. The thematic map is based on co-word network analysis and clustering. In time slice 1 (2001–2010), the main themes shown are health tourism spas, wellness tourism, health and wellness tourism Portugal, wellness tourism holistic lifestyle, and motor themes. The diagram suggests that health tourism spas and wellness tourism started as emerging or niche themes in earlier time slices but have grown in relevance and centrality over time to become significant themes in the most recent time slice. Health and wellness tourism in Portugal is a newly emerging theme at that time. The motor themes and holistic lifestyle of wellness tourism remain less central.



Note: Time Slice 1 [Motor Themes: wellness tourism, holistic, lifestyle, health and wellness tourism, Portugal; Emerging Themes: wellness, tourism, health tourism, spas], Time Slice 2 [Basic Themes: wellness tourism, wellness, tourism, health tourism, medical tourism, quality of life, health and wellness tourism, marketing, spa, well-being; Niche Themes: China, nature, consumer behavior, culture personal health, psychological well-being, self-determination theory, spiritual retreat tourism, healthy lifestyle], and Time Slice 3 [Basic Themes: wellness, tourism, spa, health consciousness, authenticity, health resorts, health tourism, wellness tourists, health and wellness tourism; Motor Themes: wellness tourism, health tourism covid-19, satisfaction, wellness destination, scale development; Niche Themes: hot spring, Japan, destination experience, nature-based tourism, sustainable, restorative environment, wine tourism; Emerging Themes: community-based tourism, branding, customer engagement]

Figure 2: Major themes in each time slice

During 2011–2019, the main themes were China, nature, consumer behavior, self-determination theory, psychological well-being, spirituality, health and wellness, medical tourism, spa, wellness tourism, and health tourism. Overall, Figure 2 analyzes the prominence and development of different research themes within the field of tourism, mainly focusing on topics related to health, wellness, spirituality, consumer behavior, and specific countries/regions like China. A 2009 major health-care reform in China and its reclassification as an upper-middle-income country in 2011 extracted a rise in global health (Minghui & Guoping, 2014; Yip et al., 2019) and resulted in the emergence of China in 2011–2019 time slice.

In the last time slice (2020–2024), when compared to the previous figure, some new themes have emerged, such as hot springs, Japan, destination image, sustainable tourism, restorative environment, health resort, authenticity, health consciousness, COVID-19, scale development, and travel restrictions. The “Motor Themes” quadrant includes themes like satisfaction, wellness tourism, wellness destination tourism, scale development, and COVID-19. Since late 2019, the emergence of COVID-19 impacted dramatically stimulated related research across disciplines including health and well-being with a widespread emphasis on wellness and satisfaction research (e.g., Al-Ansi et al., 2024; Ashton, 2018; Smith et al., 2020). “Transversal Themes” include health and wellness tourism, wellness consciousness, wellness, and health resorts. Spa and wellness tourism is positioned as a “Basic Theme.” Overall, the revised diagram shows that wellness tourism, sustainability, destinations such as Japan and hot springs, and the effects of COVID-19-related travel bans were increasingly discussed. These themes have emerged and progressed in tourism research.

4.2 Mostly adopted wellness dimensions in wellness tourism research

To answer the RQ2, we identified and categorized 214 articles related to six wellness dimensions identified in the literature review sections.

4.2.1 Nutrition and healthy eating

Nutrition practices play a role in wellness tourism by helping travelers create balanced lives and nurture long-term health. Tourists can have vastly different food preferences. Still, when at a destination, the focus tends to shift towards local food and restaurants serving nutritious “plain” meals made from wholesome ingredients. It is recommended that, while traveling, one chooses fresh, locally sourced products for a balanced diet, such as visiting farmers’ markets and grocery stores for healthy snacks and ingredients (Global Wellness Institute, 2014). Two of the 214 articles specifically illustrated nutrition and healthy eating. Boonpat et al. (2023) indicate that local food and fresh organic ingredients are strong attracting agents for health and food tourists, which ties into gastronomy tourism, while also Forlani et al. (2022) reveal that elements of food and beverage increase tourists’ wellness experiences by including options like wine, vegan diets, and detox programs.

Contrastingly, the two other studies combine these dimensions, and Hamułka et al. (2018) found that nutrition education programs for teenagers positively influence their knowledge, attitudes, and diet quality, and highlighted nutrition’s role in wellness tourism. Nutrition is not only an essential dimension in wellness tourism but also intensifies the enjoyment and effectiveness of wellness experiences (Luo et al., 2018). While past research focuses the key role of nutrition in health promotion and disease prevention, but significant gaps remain, conducting further research that fills these gaps can provide valuable insights that contribute to the wellness tourism industry and improve health benefits for both travelers and local communities. Past research in nutrition mainly applied quantitative methods and focused on the wellness model, the Big 5 model (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism), the expanded wellness model, and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model. Therefore, the intersection of nutrition, healthy eating, and wellness tourism represents a promising area for further research.

4.2.2 Wellness education

Wellness education provides knowledge to individuals as a tool to healthier and more balanced lives and a more informed society. While wellness education in tourism refers to structured programs and activities designed to educate participants about holistic health and well-being, many wellness destinations provide wellness courses, seminars, or retreats where people learn about mindfulness, stress management, nutrition, and holistic health practices (GWI, 2014). In our review, only six studies out of 214 articles focused on education in wellness and training. However, three articles in this area found that these educational offerings are often integrated into wellness retreats, resorts, and destinations, allowing travelers to learn and practice wellness techniques in immersive environments.

Moreover, Sayyad (2025) show that mindfulness-based interventions during travel can improve emotional well-being and cultivate mindfulness skills beyond the travel experience. Studies (e.g., Kaya et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Norman & Pokorny, 2017) highlight the transformative effects of mindfulness education in wellness tourism. However, research on wellness education programs’ effectiveness in wellness tourism

settings and their long-term health behavior changes is limited, with insufficient studies on their integration with other wellness services (Alemneh et al., 2025; Cohen et al., 2017). In contrast, other studies combine these dimensions with six dimensions. Most studies in this dimension focus on an expanded wellness model, wellness lifestyle (WL), personality traits (PTs), learning travel (LT) concepts/models/theories. Lastly, most applied methods in this dimension are quantitative using cluster analysis.

4.2.3 Mental health and meditation

Mental health and meditation are classified in this dimension, emotional balance and overall psychological wellness. This dimension is increasingly acknowledged and featured through various activities such as meditation, mindfulness, and yoga, to help maintain a sense of grounding and balance. Despite the growing interest, past research still presents a limited focus on it. Out of 214 reviewed articles, only 11 studies emphasized yoga, three studies were on mindfulness, 11 studies on mental health and only one study covered meditation. As meditation retreats and mindfulness-based tourism are gaining popularity, people seek out peaceful locations to practice mindfulness in natural settings for meditation or join group sessions at local studios or wellness centers (GWI, 2014). In addition, these retreats can reduce stress, enhance emotional well-being, and build psychological resilience and travelers often combine meditation with cultural immersion and nature-based activities, promoting a holistic and therapeutic experience (Blasche et al., 2021; Farkic et al., 2021; Giridharan, 2024; Yang, 2025). Mindfulness-based tourism experiences combine meditation with cultural immersion and nature-based activities, promoting holistic well-being (Farkic et al., 2021). However, research gaps in mental health and meditation within wellness tourism include studies on long-term effectiveness, integration with wellness components, cultural differences, consumer expectations, satisfaction, and economic impact. Addressing these gaps will improve the understanding and effectiveness of these practices (Goyal et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2025). Most studies in this dimension focus on wellness lifestyle (WL), personality traits (PTs), learning travel (LT), the relationship among PTs, WL, and LT, multi-dimension, seven motivational dimensions, Wellness Tourist Motivation Scale (WTMS), push and pull motivation, motivation model, and spiritual model. Lastly, most applied methods in this dimension are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods.

4.2.4 Spa and massage

Spa treatments and massages provide relaxation and rejuvenation. Many hotels and resorts provide spa services, and tourists may also locate standalone spas specializing in different wellness therapies, including aromatherapy, hot stone massage, and deep tissue massage (GWI, 2014). Spa treatments like massages, hydrotherapy, and thermal baths provide numerous benefits for physical, emotional, social, intellectual, occupational, and spiritual wellness. In our review of 214 articles, 46 focused on spas, two on Thai massage, two on thermal baths, and 17 on onsens. In comparison, the other studies combine these dimensions with multiple health dimensions (Moriuchi et al., 2024) and dimensions of wellness spa tourism (Han et al., 2017). Thailand is an attractive health and wellness travel market due to its unique cultural and historical tradition, changing consumer behavior trends and health-focused tourism (Moriuchi et al., 2024). Spa and massage improve body circulation (physical wellness), reduce stress (emotional wellness), foster connections (social wellness), improve through mindfulness (intellectual wellness), benefit from work-life balance (occupational wellness), and are enhanced through holistic healing modalities by offering relaxation and rejuvenation (spiritual wellness) (Dimitrova, 2025; Field, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021). While spa experiences promote stress reduction, meditation, and personal wellness goals, some researchers (Chang et al., 2024; Cohen et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2023; Sthapit et al., 2025) reveal that wellness retreats and group activities can foster bonding among individuals based on shared experiences and wellness goals.

Most studies in this dimension applied quantitative methods and focused on service quality and its five elements, tourist confidence, motivation model, and satisfaction and integration with other wellness practices (Martins et al., 2025). Future research should focus on unifying definitions, exploring further consumer motivations and satisfaction, analyzing cultural influences, integrating local wisdom, and understanding contextual needs. Addressing these gaps will advance academic knowledge and support the sustainable growth of wellness tourism.

4.2.5 Beauty and personal care

Beauty and personal care within wellness tourism relate to the range of offerings and practices that enhance self-image, self-esteem, and well-being, and are increasingly finding their way into wellness tourism products, driven by consumer interest in a holistic approach to health and beauty. Consumers use beauty tourism in a variety of ways: seeking local beauty rituals, engaging with holistic resorts offering natural and organic treatments that often rely heavily on Indigenous ingredients, or exploring alternatives to address beauty care and health, including emerging trends in anti-aging, skincare, cosmetics, and nail care (GWI, 2014).

Overall, of the total 214 review articles, 11 were dedicated to anti-aging, 4 to skincare, 1 to cosmetics, 2 to facials, and none to nail treatment.

In addition, wellness tourism in the beauty and personal care area emphasizes improvements in one's physical appearance, relaxation, and well-being benefits through various treatments and services. The industry is growing to accommodate and support more travelers seeking holistic wellness activities that include aesthetic improvements and self-care (GWI, 2023). Furthermore, Wellness tourism offers benefits to physical well-being through beauty-related outcomes, such as massages, facials, body wraps, and skincare regimens, that improve skin health and promote relaxation and stress reduction (Liao et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the beauty and personal care area of wellness tourism highlights subjects where scholarly research, industry reports, and other authoritative sources may be absent or limited. This area contemplates treatments that include, wellness goals, sustainable and ethical practices, cultural authenticity, personalized strategies, innovative technologies, evidence-based practice, accessibility, inclusivity, and consumer education (Smith, 2021). The majority of studies in this area of scholarship examine health tourism, wellness tourism, beauty tourism, cosmetic surgery tourism (CST), medical tourism, protective motivation theory, attachment theory, and service-dominant logic. Lastly, the majority of methods utilized in this area are quantitative and qualitative.

4.2.6 Physical fitness

Physical fitness means more than exercise. It means providing a well-rounded experience and emphasizing holistic health that supports balancing healthy lifestyles before, during, and after travel. The Global Wellness Institute (2014) defines consumer spending on physical activities intentionally performed in leisure and recreation. The core of the market consists of services that support participation in 3 recreation-based physical activity categories: fitness, sports, active recreation, and mindful movement. Of 214 articles, 43 articles referred to sports, one to physical fitness, and one to recreation. The remaining articles merge these dimensions with 6As tourism components and use standards to deliver wellness tourism services (Praprom & Laipaporn, 2023). Based on the literature review, wellness tourism assists in the enhancement of physical, mental, and emotional/spiritual health via visitor travel experiences, and will see an increased focus on yoga retreats, spa treatments, and fitness trips focused on aspects of wellness via physical activity, to help boost physical fitness, reduced stress, and management reasonably of chronic conditions (Liao et al., 2023; Martins et al., 2025; Smith & Puczkó, 2014). While attending to the tourism and physical activity amalgamations presents a narrow research opportunity, the nexus of physical fitness and wellness in tourism offers a greater opportunity. More is known about the health benefits of physical activity; however, limited research explores the transferability of these benefits, specifically in wellness tourism. Continuing to bridge these knowledge elements is critical to furthering the field's academic literature as well as applied practice in industry, allowing tourism stakeholders to enhance both traveler health and satisfaction using more thoughtfully coordinated fitness program offerings (GWI, 2014, 2023). The majority of studies in this area considered physical exercise, psychosomatic health, mindfulness, SWOT, TOWS Matrix, the modified BCG Matrix, a motivation model, and a satisfaction model. Lastly, a majority of studies in this area applied quantitative methods.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The development of wellness tourism underscores the intricate interplay of various facets, encompassing nutrition, wellness education, mental health, spa and massage therapies, beauty and personal care, and physical fitness, all pivotal in enhancing the overall well-being of travelers. This study aimed to identify updated knowledge of wellness tourism studies with progressing evolution, provide insights into the comprehensive studies regarding frequent research methods conducted in wellness tourism studies, and highlight studied gaps and emerging opportunities in six wellness tourism dimensions for stakeholders. This study is the only two-phase methodological literature review focusing on wellness tourism and its dimensions. This study provides (1) different angles of wellness tourism evolution, (2) insights into frequent research methods conducted in wellness tourism studies, and (3) research gaps based on wellness tourism dimensions that scholars and practitioners may find helpful for further research.

This study offers the theoretical contribution of wellness tourism research by identifying the evolution and trends based on thematic evolution that past bibliometric analysis and literature review studies did not offer. It also provides the gaps in frequently used methods in wellness tourism research. In addition, it involves integrating and refining various dimensions of wellness tourism and highlights emerging opportunities in research based on the six wellness tourism dimensions. For example, the systematic literature review identified studies on wellness tourism related to nutrition and healthy eating, as well as wellness education, highlighting important emerging opportunities for future research in these areas. It aims to direct researchers

in the field of health and wellness tourism towards new ideas and to further develop health and wellness tourism marketing knowledge and scholarship by providing additional space for conceptual papers.

As a practical theoretical implication, this study provides tourism managers and policymakers with sufficient information to better inform their practice. The practical implications of trends in wellness tourism research, along with the new opportunities arising from its dimensions, are meaningful to tourism practitioners and policymakers. These could serve as a reasonable basis for wellness and health investors to assess the growing wellness tourism economy for a potential competitive advantage. The study also provides perspectives for strategic planning and policy development by offering insight into how wellness tourism can be integrated into broader tourism practice. Policymakers and tourism stakeholders need to pay more attention to the lack of or insufficient research in these dimensions to address the inadequacies in meeting the emerging, changing, and dynamic demand for wellness tourism.

As research progresses, it illustrates an escalation in the demand for holistic and individualized experiences of wellness that incorporate physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness. This change suggests tourism operators will need to respond by developing individualized wellness programs that meet these multiple wellness needs and create heightened satisfaction and loyalty from guests. Likewise, these findings could be utilized by policymakers to help create policies and infrastructure, which will support sustainable wellness tourism practices. Through recognizing these emerging trends and possibilities, binary and rack-up offers customers increased rates of participation, improve competitive platforming, and contribute to the sustainable growth of the tourism industry overall.

Research has advanced significantly in understanding the effects of different wellness components, but important gaps remain, particularly in understanding how to combine them into an integrated wellness experience. Nutrition plays a critical role in promoting health; wellness education focuses on behavioral changes, and there is an increased focus on mental health and meditation. All of these factors are important when constructing a well-rounded wellness tourism experience. The increasing popularity of spa services and beauty and personal care services also denotes a cultural shift towards the consumption of holistic self-care. Fitness is key in advocating for more active lifestyles, a key goal of wellness tourism. Addressing these gaps through this research will help to build academic knowledge and improve industry practice. This research will also help ensure that wellness tourism can continue to evolve in connection with new consumer needs and promote health and well-being.

While this study is positioned to address research gaps and to contribute knowledge about the research revolution in wellness tourism and potential emergent opportunities, it has certain limitations in its methodological approach. The first limitation is that only one database (as dictated by the bibliometric program) was used. Future studies may include additional databases to enhance coverage in studies. The assessment of frequently used research methods is based solely on 214 studies focused on wellness tourism. In further analysis, it would be valuable to identify which methods are primarily employed based on the dimensions associated with wellness. Additionally, this used only six dimensions of wellness tourism. Future studies must aim to close existing gaps in wellness tourism by examining intersections among various wellness components, understanding consumer satisfaction, and measuring long-term evaluations of wellness programs. Furthermore, research should inquire into how the various dimensions of wellness: nutrition, mental health, and physical fitness, for example, intersect to produce holistic wellness experiences.

It is also important to evaluate consumer satisfaction in order to assess the effectiveness and desirability of the wellness offerings. Assessment of the longer-term implications of wellness programs can help understand continued benefit and assist in the ongoing development of more effective and integrated wellness programs. To further increase acceptance, profit, and sustainability in the wellness and health tourism industry, we strongly suggest more cross-country studies in this area. By paying attention to these areas, we will advance academic knowledge and support industry practice, encouraging wellness tourism as it adapts to meet changing consumer demands and lifestyles, promoting healthier, happier, more sustainable lifestyles.

Future research in wellness tourism should explore several key issues to fill existing gaps. First, it is urgent to have programs for mental health in a wellness tourism context. Programs that incorporate evidence-based practices and therapies potentially support mental wellness and physical well-being (Martins et al., 2025).

Second, personalizing service models is important. The literature should investigate how to better address individual needs and preferences in an area that has thus far focused on one-size-fits-all models. Technology could also benefit personalized wellness and leisure approaches, allowing guests to tailor wellness experiences to their personal wellness goals by selecting activities and treatments (Smith & Puczkó, 2014, 2015).

Finally, cross-sector partnerships may contribute tremendous value to the wellness industry. Future studies should address the partnerships among wellness providers, health care practitioners, and

organizations to enhance wellness offerings that integrate physical health, mental health, and social well-being. This collaborative effort may help offer more inclusive and effective well-being tourism experiences (GWI, 2023). Overall, future research can foster a more inclusive and integrative wellness paradigm in tourism.

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