

Wellness Package Tours in the Eyes of Chinese Travelers: Why? What? How?

Chengcheng WANG

Qi YIN

Daniel LEUNG

School of Hotel & Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract:

With merging popularity of wellness package tours in the Chinese community, this study conducted in-depth interviews with twelve Chinese travelers who have wellness package tour experiences with the ultimate goal of exploring their motivations to join such tours (why), touristic activities they participated in (what) and post-tour influence on them (how).

Keywords: Wellness tourism; Package tour; Motivations; Activities; Chinese travelers.

1. Introduction

In recent years, wellness tourism has emerged as a prevalent mode of traveling among Chinese travelers. Statista's (2022) statistics show that the market sizes of health and wellness tourism in China in 2018 and 2020 reached RMB 69.1 billion and RMB 100 billion, respectively. The growth rate in China aligns with the same figure in global wellness tourism market, which was valued at approximately USD 772.71 billion in 2023 (Global Wellness Institute, 2023).

Defined as pre-organized travel itineraries that include the services of accommodations, transportation and wellness-related activities, wellness package tours become a popular tourism product among modern travelers (Kim et al., 2017; Majeed & Kim, 2022). As China is a major source market for many destinations, adding that wellness package tours grow rapidly in the Chinese community (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013), it is essential to thoroughly understand the motivations driving Chinese travelers' participation in wellness package tours. Also, understanding the touristic activities they participated while joining those tours as well as the impact of those tours on their personal life are other invaluable information that would assist wellness package tour operators in optimizing the design of their future wellness package tours.

In this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with Chinese travelers who recently joined wellness package tours to thoroughly understand how they perceive wellness package tours from their standpoint. Specifically, the threefold objectives of this exploratory study are: (1) To identify factors motivating Chinese travelers to participate in wellness package tours (*why they joined wellness package tours*); (2) To profile the activities conducted in and out of the package during the wellness tour (*what they did when they joined wellness package tours*); and (3) To examine the impact of participation in wellness package tours on travelers' mental well-being (*whether and how they feel after joining wellness package tours*).

Through investigating the motives, content of wellness activities, and impact of participating in the tours from those who had first-hand experience, the results of this study shall provide wellness package tour operators with insights about how to optimize the design and promotion of their wellness package tours. Focusing on Chinese travelers and packaged

tours, the results of this study are also expected to extend the literature via developing an integrated framework which overviews why Chinese travelers chose the products, what they have experienced, and how their mental health effects were.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a critical review on past literature pertinent to two areas which are relevant to the core topic of this study - (1) Motivations of wellness tourism and wellness tours; and (2) Impact of wellness tours on mental health.

2.1. *Motivations of wellness tourism and wellness tours*

Wellness tourism and wellness package tours have gained much attention in recent years as an increasing number of people seek experiences that promote health and well-being (Papp & Lorincz, 2016). Yang et al. (2015) tested and proved that Korean tourists' needs for healing experience has a positive impact on their selection of healing tour products and transformational intention of healing tour behavior.

Recent evidence suggests that tourists' motivation of wellness tourism has been a topic of interest among scholars (e.g., Dean & Suhartanto, 2019; Moscardo, 2011; Ting et al., 2021). Generally speaking, past research mostly focused on identifying key motives and developing motivation models. For example, Kessler et al. (2020) argued that wellness tourists' motivation scale is a statistical tool to measure wellness tourist motivation, emphasizing the importance of understanding factors affecting motivation. Kim et al. (2017) suggested that tourists' primary motivation to travel to wellness tourism destinations are prestige and luxury, novelty and knowledge, self-development, as well as relaxation and escape.

Damijanić (2020) claimed nine motivation factors - including three push motivation and six pull motivation factors - as criteria in the segment process of one market niche, identified by applying the theory of push and pull motivations in wellness tourism. Push factors refer to internal forces that motivate or create a desire to satisfy a need to travel, while pull factors are recognized as destination attributes (Kozak, 2002). Travel motivation factors can be categorized into distinct dimensions. Push motivation factors are identified as health trends, relaxation and reward, and novelty. Pull motivation factors related to tourist destinations are categorized as cultural and natural heritage, entertainment and recreation, and landscape. By applying travel motivation factors as segmentation criteria, three clusters - namely high wellness, immaterial wellness, and low wellness clusters - emerged which underscores the significance of relaxation, wellness infrastructure, and natural resources as critical elements in the research on wellness tourism.

2.2. *Impacts of wellness tours on mental health*

Recent research suggests that wellness and rural green tourism can significantly influence tourists' mental health and well-being. Wellness retreats have been shown to lead to substantial improvements in multiple health dimensions, including anthropometric measures, psychological well-being, and cognitive function, with benefits maintained for at least six weeks post-retreat (Cohen et al., 2017). Rural green tourism offers mental health improvement and rehabilitation opportunities by connecting nature and rural traditions (Soloviov et al., 2019). Lopes et al. (2022) proposed that volunteer tourism could be considered a sub-segment of wellness tourism, as both share similar motivations related to well-being and personal development.

Numerous studies indicate that wellness tourism significantly reduces stress levels. Cohen et al. (2017) found that participants in wellness retreats reported lower levels of perceived stress and anxiety after engaging in relaxation activities. The tranquil environments often associated with wellness tours contribute to this effect, providing a respite from daily stressors. Álvarez-Sánchez et al. (2024) stated that wellness tours emphasize mindfulness practices which have been shown to increase self-awareness and emotional regulation. Similarly, Balcioglu (2024) claimed that wellness package tours improve overall mood and emotional health. Activities like yoga and meditation promote positive emotions and a sense of community among participants, which can lead to enhanced emotional well-being. Participating in wellness package tours can foster social connections – which are vital for mental well-being.

This review indicates the value and potential of studying the impact of wellness tourism on mental health through travelers' experiences, with possible motivations. However, much of the research focuses on the impact of a vast field covering all wellness tourism and regions of travelers. Therefore, this study will assume the relationship between mental health and wellness package tours to analyze how wellness package tour activities impact and improve Chinese travelers' mental health in deepening research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

Considering that the goal of this study is to thoroughly understand wellness package tours in the eyes of Chinese travelers, adding that existing knowledge about this topic is scarce, qualitative techniques are considered as more appropriate to be used in this study than quantitative counterparts. Specifically, this study adopted semi-structured focus group interview to identify factors motivating Chinese travelers to participate in wellness package tours, to profile the activities conducted in and out of the package during the wellness tour, and to examine the post-tour influence on them.

In each interview, there are three sub-sections and each sub-section has certain interview questions designed to achieve each of those three objectives. In the first sub-section, the questions are designed to recall reasons driving participants to join wellness package tours. In the second sub-section, the questions allow participants to share their package tour daily experience and focus on the impressiveness and effectiveness of the activities. To investigate the impact of tours on their mental well-being, in the final sub-section, participants were asked to grade their package tour experiences and share the influences of those tours on them.

3.2. Participants

The target population of this study are Chinese travelers regardless of age, gender, and region. All qualified interviewees must fulfill three criteria: (1) Chinese travelers who have participated in at least one wellness package tour; (2) Can speak, read and write Chinese; (3) Full-paid customers. Interviewees were recruited using convenience sampling method.

Focus group interviews, with four participants in a group, were conducted online using video-conferencing tools. The authors moderated interviews based on open-ended questions. During the interviews, the exact activities, experiences and changes in well-being were measured to indicate travelers' preferences for wellness tours in or out of the package. We stopped recruiting and interviewing extra interviewees when data saturation was attained. In total, twelve Chinese travelers participated and shared the insights with us. Eight are female

(66.7%), and seven participants have participated in wellness package tours two times or more (58.3%). In terms of occupations, eight are full-time employees working in office. Three are doing art-related work and one is in education field.

3.3. Data analysis

A combination of narrative and thematic analysis methods was used to analyze the data collected from interviews. Narrative analysis allows us to delve deeply into the personal stories shared by interviewees, capturing the complexity and richness of their individual experiences in the wellness package tours. This method is valuable for exploring the emotional and contextual impacts that shape participants' perspectives, providing a nuanced view of their tour experience and influence. Besides, thematic analysis was applied to identify and examine recurring themes across the interviews. This method distils key insights and patterns that emerge from the interview content, facilitating a broader understanding of shared opinions and experiences among participants. Combining these two analytical methods are expected to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the unique and collective dimensions of participants' experiences. Lastly, the themes and sub-themes generated from interview data are further explained, modified, and integrated with the literature.

4. Results

4.1. WHY: Motivations of participating in wellness package tours

In examining the motivations of Chinese travelers participating in wellness package tours, several themes and sub-themes have emerged. Comparing the literatures, the modified themes and sub-themes have been shown as Table 1.

As the analyzed sub-themes enrich some of the literature measures, the modified themes of health and well-being outcomes, relaxation, novelty seeking, and quality of environment have been adapted from literature. As basic wellness, extra wellness, intangible wellness, cultural and natural heritage, entertainment and recreation are the different levels of wellness activities or other tour-related activities, those measures are integrated into the theme of wellness-focused tour design, showing the wellness activities in the designed itinerary and the reputation of the package tour related parties.

The results also summarized three motivations as extension measures in push and pull factors. Personal interest is found to be a push factor as the opportunity to learn interesting wellness practices motivates travelers to join wellness tours. The convenience and accessibility play dual roles as pull factors. The proximity of the tour or the ease of travel motivates participation while also avoiding complex travel arrangements. Also, social influences act as significant pull factors, as the wellness package tours offer opportunities for travelers to connect with like-minded individuals and foster relationships.

Table 1. Analysis on motivations

Measures (from literature)	Modified themes	Sub-theme	Evidence from interview data
Health Trend	Health and well-being outcomes	Physical Health Improvement; Emotional and Mental Well-Being	<p>"Because sometimes my body is somatized, and I have a mild anxiety disorder. I heard online that I can go traveling to relax and relieve the symptoms"</p> <p>(Participant L, Group 3)</p> <p>"This immersive experience will allow you to slow down, explore and become aware of your inner self"</p> <p>(Participant H, Group 2)</p>

APacCHRIE 2025 Youth Conference (28-30 May 2025)

Relaxation and Rewards	Relaxation	Relaxation; Pressure relief	<i>"Because of work, I was a little stressed and anxious"</i> (Participant I, Group 3) <i>"To relax and relieve stress"</i> (Participant E, Group 2) <i>"Because this kind of travel focuses more on relaxing and relieving stress on the body and mind"</i> (Participant C, Group 1)
Novelty	Novelty Seeking	Escape from Routine Life; Try New Things	<i>"I want to step out of my current life circle"</i> (Participant C, Group 1) <i>"Because my work is usually quite regular"</i> (Participant D, Group 1)
Extension 1	Personal Interest		<i>"Because I have always wanted to learn or practice mindfulness and meditation."</i> (Participant J, Group 3)
Basic Wellness Extra Wellness Intangible Wellness Cult. and Nat. Heritage Enter. and Recreat.	Wellness-focused Tour Design	Attractive Itinerary; Attractive Wellness Activities; Package Tour Reputation	<i>"I was very interested in its content because it was about meditation and Zen practice"</i> (Participant I, Group 3) <i>"Because I saw some of the mindfulness teachers in their promotions are quite famous"</i> (Participant K, Group 3)
Landscape	Quality of Environment	Unique Destinations; Connection with Nature	<i>"I want to experience the culture there and see some scenery"</i> (Participant F, Group 2) <i>"I think the environment there is very beautiful"</i> (Participant K, Group 3)
Extension 2	Convenience and Accessibility		<i>"Time and place are also very important to me"</i> (Participant C, Group 1) <i>"I will consider its products, destination, price comprehensively"</i> (Participant K, Group 3)
Extension 3	Social Influences	Memorable Experiences; Community Engagement; Friendship Formation	<i>"I think meeting many new friends from different professions enriches my life"</i> (Participant D, Group 1) <i>"I want to know if there are other people in the same situation as me, and how they solved it"</i> (Participant K, Group 3)

4.2. WHAT: Activities conducted in wellness package tours

Five types of activities are summarized according to the non-exclusive functionality (Table 2). It is found that wellness package tours can be multi-functional focus and involve diverse activities, which enrich the package tour and contribute to participants' overall well-being, even though the effectiveness or impact may differ among participants.

The study initially aimed to investigate the activities that were during the tour but not arranged in the package. However, those out-of-package activities are actually conducted in free time, which are designed as part of the package. To not confuse those activities, the study integrates them into above types according to their major functions.

Table 2. Analysis on activities

Types of Activities	Examples	Functions	Evidence from interview data
Social Interaction	group games, sharing circles, and communal gatherings	Engage in conversations and shared experiences; Reduce feelings of isolation; Enhance interpersonal relationships; Improve emotional well-being and resilience	<i>"It is fun to hang out with everyone at night"</i> (Participant B, Group 1) <i>"I made one or two very like-minded friends"</i> (Participant A, Group 1) <i>"In the evening, people will share what happened inside themselves during morning insight session"</i> (Participant G, Group 2)
Nature Experience	sightseeing, hiking, and climbing	Contribute to physical health; Evoke feelings of awe and tranquility; Relieve stress	<i>"It was a very healing and comfortable hike up there"</i> (Participant E, Group 2) <i>"Watching a sunrise impressed me most"</i> (Participant D, Group 1) <i>"We went to the forest and look at some trees"</i> (Participant K, Group 3)
Wellness Practice	mindfulness, yoga, meditation, and light eating	Focus on inner selves; Foster a sense of calm and clarity; Reduce anxiety; Enhance emotional regulation;	<i>"There was a 30-minute meditation session in the morning with the guidance of the teacher"</i> (Participant K, Group 3)
Entertainment	experiential and hands-on	Promote engagement; Explore new skills and interests;	<i>"We can draw some scenery outdoors or take photos"</i> (Participant J, Group 3)

	activities, watching movies	Create a balance between leisure and personal growth	
Cultural Experience	local traditions	Engage with the cultural richness of their surroundings	<i>"We visited the local villagers' house and sang and danced on the campfire"</i> (Participant E, Group 2)

4.3. HOW: Impacts on traveler's mental well-being

The participation of wellness package tour has been found with positive impacts to mental well-being among Chinese travelers, which the impacts can be categorized into several interconnected themes through the model clarified based on past studies (Table 3).

Reduced stress levels are a notable impact, with participants experiencing decreased anxiety and enhanced relaxation during and after the tours. Emotional health also showed marked improvement, as travelers reported increased happiness and positivity, as well as improved emotional regulation through mindfulness practices. These findings align with previous literature, which suggests that wellness activities can lead to substantial psychological benefits and overall mental health enhancement. Social interaction and support are crucial in enhancing mental well-being during wellness tours. Bonding over group activities and receiving emotional support from fellow travelers create a supportive social environment.

Among some participants, the long-term mental well-being impact is sustained with the post-tour behavioral changes, which is labeled as an extension of the post-tour impact. With travelers continuing to practice wellness activities such as yoga and meditation, long-term changes suggest that wellness tours can have enduring positive effects on participants' mental well-being. Lastly, the themes and sub-themes generated from interview data are further explained, modified, and integrated with the literature and conceptual framework. Based on our findings, a framework can be done showing the different factors with motivations in wellness package tour participations, extending to 12 factors with one new push factor (Personal Interest) and two new pull factors (Convenience and Accessibility; Social Influence). Accordingly, there are positive direct relationships regarding the five types of wellness package tour participations of travelers' mental health (Figure 1).

Table 3. Analysis on impacts

Measures (from literature)	Modified themes	Explanations	Evidence from interview data
Reduce Stress Level	Reduce Stress Level	Decreased anxiety levels, enhanced relaxation	<i>"Reduce my anxiety through meditation"</i> (Participant F, Group 2) <i>"Freedom from the stress of repetitive work"</i> (Participant B, Group 1)
Emotional health	Emotional Health	Increased happiness and positivity, improved emotional regulation through mindfulness practices	<i>"Feel more energetic to do some yoga practise"</i> (Participant F, Group 2) <i>"I calm down to observe the environments around myself"</i> (Participant J, Group 3)
Social Connections	Social Interaction and Support	Bonding over group activities, gaining emotional support from fellow travelers	<i>"Being around people with different lifestyles provide me the courage to socialize and start a conversation."</i> (Participant C, Group 1) <i>"With peer companion, not feel embarrassed in meditation in the nature"</i> (Participant K, Group 3)
Extension	Long-term Mental Well-being Impact	Continued practice of wellness activities post-tour (e.g., yoga, meditation)	<i>"I practice Pilates for long-term after participating the tour"</i> (Participant G, Group 2) <i>"I have been a vegetarian regularly since tried fasting"</i> (Participant I, Group 3)

Figure 1. Conceptual framework



Note. (H1) Pull Motivation: Internal forces that creative a desire to satisfy needs in wellness package tour; (H2) Push Motivation: Perceived destination attributes providing differences between immaterial and high wellness segments, and the low wellness segment in wellness tourism.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1. Discussion

The findings reveal that participants who experienced wellness package tours showed a significant improvement in mental health with five types of activities. The activities match with push and pull motivations to attract Chinese travelers to participate in the wellness package tour. Reviewing the motivation factors in Damijanić's (2020) previous research, the

results point out personal interest, convenience and accessibility, and social influences as extra motivations for wellness package tour participation.

The study deepens existing literature while introducing a new dimension regarding the intertwined nature of behavior changes with long-term well-being benefits. The insights gained from this study underscore the significance of a holistic approach to wellness tourism, which encompasses the activities undertaken and the broader psychological and social benefits derived from participation in wellness tours.

5.2. Implications

Defining the wellness package tour enriches the concept of wellness tourism as a product in the market. With four push factors and eight pull factors, the study supports the previous literature regarding motivations of wellness tourism and tours, while extending the motivation items of personal interest, accessibility and social influence. The five types of activities included in their tours enrich tourists' experiences and impact their short-term and long-term mental health. The study presents the path of travelers from choosing a wellness package tour, participating in the tour, and influences after the tour, providing a conceptual framework that can be used for motivation study, wellness tourism study, etc.

The study investigates the motivations and further improves the understanding of what drives Chinese travelers to choose the wellness package tour, which helps tour operator businesses and travel agencies to tailor their marketing strategies and offerings to satisfy travelers' needs better, such as emphasizing the accessibility and convenience for the tour destination, the effectiveness of wellness impacts through specified activities, etc. Studying the impacts on travelers' post-trip wellness status also refines the core concept of the wellness tour, providing evidence of wellness functions and package tour marketing. The feedback on long-term mental well-being impacts implies that wellness activities should be more practical and sustainable, with accessible methods to practice and maintain the effects. The research recommends tour operators, travel agencies, and marketers improve the package tour product based on Chinese consumers' needs, and classify the needs into tour activities, ultimately creating competitiveness and satisfied wellness package tour practices in the Chinese market.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Three aspects of our study require concern for future exploration. A limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size ($N=12$), which may affect the generalizability of findings to a broader population of Chinese travelers. At the same time, since this study relies on group interviews, participant responses may be influenced. Because of social desirability bias, where they provide answers indicate other groupmates' overview rather than their true opinions. Future research could explore themes of motivation and mental health across diverse cultural contexts to enrich the understanding of wellness tourism globally.

Additionally, as a cross-sectional study that analyses the problems only at one specific point, the study result is unlikely to retain the explanatory and predictive ability for wellness package tours in the eyes of Chinese travelers with the rapid development of business updates. The effect estimates in the model are based on interventional and prospective interview studies. Hence, future research should be undertaken to explore more segments of motivated travelers to wellness package tours and study more specific items targeting market situations for wellness tourism businesses to extend real-life strategies.

References

- Álvarez-Sánchez, A., Rojas-Lara, G., Vaca-González, E., Abreu, A., Monroy, H., Carvalho, J., & Liberato, P. (2024). The impact of health and wellness tourism on tourists' physical, mental, and emotional balance. *Advances in Tourism, Technology and Systems ICOTTS 2023*, 539-548. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9765-7_47
- Balcioglu, Y. S. (2024). Exploring consumer engagement and satisfaction in health and wellness tourism through text-mining. *Kybernetes*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/K-12-2023-2721>
- Cohen, M. M., Elliott, F., Oates, L., Schembri, A., & Mantri, N. (2017). Do wellness tourists get well? an observational study of multiple dimensions of health and well-being after a week-long retreat. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 23(2), 140-148. <https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2016.0268>
- Damijanić, A. T. (2020). Travel motivations as criteria in the wellness tourism market segmentation process. *Academica Turistica - Tourism and Innovation Journal*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.13.201-213>
- Dean, D., & Suhartanto, D. (2019). The formation of visitor behavioral intention to creative tourism: the role of push-Pull motivation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 24(5), 393-403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2019.1572631>
- Global Wellness Institute. (2023). *Wellness tourism market size, share, growth, and industry. analysis*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessresearchinsights.com/market-reports/wellness-tourism-market-117450>
- Heung, V. C., & Kucukusta, D. (2013). Wellness tourism in China: Resources, development and marketing. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 15(4), 346-359. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.1880>
- Kessler, D., Lee, J. H., & Whittingham, N. (2020). The wellness tourist motivation scale: A new statistical tool for measuring wellness tourist motivation. *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*, 3(1), 24-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2020.1849930>
- Kim, E., Chiang, L., & Tang, L. R. (2017). Investigating wellness tourists' motivation, engagement, and loyalty: in search of the missing link. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 34, 867-879. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2016.1261756>
- Kozak, M. (2002). Comparative analysis of tourist motivations by nationality and destination. *Tourism Management*, 23(3), 221-232. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(01\)00090-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(01)00090-5)
- Lopes, M. C., Dinis, G., & Poças, S. (2022). Can Volunteer Tourism be a sub-segment of Wellness Tourism? *International Conference on Tourism Research*, 15(1), 208-215. <https://doi.org/10.34190/ictr.15.1.300>
- Majeed, S., & Kim, W. G. (2022). Emerging trends in wellness tourism: a scoping review. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 6(2), 853-873. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTI-02-2022-0046>
- Moscardo, G. (2011). Exploring social representations of tourism planning: issues for governance. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4-5), 423-436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.558625>
- Papp, Z., & Lorincz, K. (2016). Health tourism trends. *Health*, 5(3-4), 29-44.
- Statista. (2022, Mar 15). *Market size of health and wellness tourism in China from 2015 to 2018 with estimates until 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1128793/china-market-size-of-wellness-tourism/>
- Soloviev, O., Dyachenko, Yu. Y., & Kozak, R. (2019). Formation of a precise behavioral motor response to an external pain stimulus is not possible without a subjective experience of pain. *Neurophysiology*, 51(6), 462-474. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11062-020-09843-8>
- Ting, T., Changtai, L., Linjun, H., & Zhiping, Z. (2021). Study on the influence of health and wellness tourists' pull motivation on revisit intention - the moderating role of the push motivation. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 251, 3047. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202125103047>
- Yang, J. Y., Paek, S., Kim, T. (Terry), & Lee, T. H. (2015). Health tourism: Needs for healing experience and intentions for transformation in wellness resorts in Korea. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 27(8), 1881-1904. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-11-2013-0505>