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Factors Affecting Choice of Wellness Tourism Destination: Perspectives of Families With Children in Mainland China

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ABSTRACT

Although wellness tourism and family tourism have received much attention from academics, research on the factors influencing families with children to choose wellness tourism is limited. A grounded theory approach was used to reveal the influencing factors and motivations of families with children when choosing wellness tourism destinations. First, family members (both parents and children) are motivated by the pursuit of health to promote physical and mental well-being. Second, the need for intergenerational solitude is crucial, allowing family members to enjoy personal space and activities tailored to their individual needs. Third, child-friendly facilities and activities are crucial for children's development. These findings highlight the importance of intergenerational dynamics and health pursuits with a theoretical contribution. For the industry, wellness destinations should offer diverse activities catering to both adults and children, ensuring intergenerational independent experiences. This study provides valuable insights for industry managers aiming to develop family-oriented wellness tourism products.

1 | Introduction

Over the past several decades, wellness tourism has become a popular market segment globally against the background of economic development and the aging of society (Huang and Xu 2014). According to the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) (a non-profit organization that facilitates health globally through preventive healthcare and health education), the global wellness tourism market was valued at \$814.6 billion in 2022 and it is expected to increase at a compound annual growth rate of 12.42% from 2023 to 2030 (GWI 2023). Despite the huge impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the international tourism market, the outlook for the wellness tourism market remains promising and it has been regarded as a kick-starter for the recovery of the tourism industry as a whole (Gurunathan and Lakshmi 2023). As the homeland of various traditional health practices such as Ayurveda, Yoga and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which emphasize the holistic health and balance of the body and mind, Asia has a significant competitive advantage as a wellness tourism destination (Barcan 2020; Chitrakorn 2019; Laing

and Weiler 2007). The Chinese wellness culture of massage and traditional Chinese medicine has a long history. Chinese travelers are also increasingly aware of the importance of disease prevention and physical fitness in their daily lives (Yang and Yang 2020).

Family tourism is also a significantly increasing segment in the tourism industry. According to investigations on family travel, 95% of individuals prioritize finding a destination that can keep everyone engaged and satisfied. This is corroborated by the fact that 70% of families cite child-friendly amenities as a deciding factor, which explains why some families choose to stay in hotels with child-friendly services (China Tourism Academy 2018). It is human nature for children to have fun with their parents, but some parent-child tourism products that focus on children's needs fail to take care of the needs of adults, making it difficult for adults to free themselves from caring for children (China Tourism Academy 2018). Partly to satisfy both the children and parents and partly because of improvements in people's health awareness, some wellness destinations have

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begun to provide services for both parents and children. For example, the Six Senses Hotel Resorts and Spa brand has integrated wellness activities such as yoga and Zumba with services for children (Arean 2019). Wellness destinations that meet the needs of parents for recreation and children for healthy activities are likely to be popular. China has also seen a growing number of wellness destinations attempting to cater to family tourism (DTZ Research Institute 2020).

In contrast to the trend for wellness tourism in China and other countries, family wellness tourism has not been fully developed. With the growing emphasis on health and wellness tourism, the demand for wellness tourism continues to climb. Still, current tourism products and services mostly focus on the pursuit of economic benefits, often ignoring tourists' expectations for unique experiences and participation (Jiang et al. 2025; Zhou et al. 2023). This mismatch between supply and demand, as well as the lack of a targeted evaluation system, has seriously constrained the performance of wellness tourism in meeting the diverse needs of family tourists (Zhou et al. 2023). Historically, the Chinese wellness tourism market has previously been more focused on the needs of the elderly, and the emphasis has been on the development of retirement tourism (DTZ Research Institute 2020).

The Chinese market is therefore not yet well-positioned for family wellness tourism, and the range of products is being enriched to meet the needs of travelers. For example, some destinations like Aranya are promoting themselves with the slogan “seek more wisdom, more fulfillment, and more love” (Aranya 2022). Nianhua Bay is a popular destination that offers adults Zen meditation activities and also helps children learn about traditional culture and engage in nature study (Nianhua Bay 2022). It is a favored destination for family wellness trips in China, although it is not designed specifically for families.

To create a wellness tourism destination that is adapted to the Chinese market, it is first necessary to recognize what Chinese tourists want. Thus, the following questions arise: why do family travelers choose destinations and what do they want to achieve or experience? This study built on previous theoretical research in both wellness tourism and family tourism and used qualitative research methods to collect and analyze primary data from the perspective of family members (parents, children) as well as the factors that influence their choice of destination. The findings reveal families' perceptions of wellness tourism and their reasons for choosing wellness tourism. The results also provide Chinese wellness destinations with a deeper understanding of tourists' needs and can help managers to design products that better meet these needs.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Wellness Travel Development and Motivation

Scholars agree that health tourism should be defined as a comprehensive concept incorporating both medical and wellness tourism (Lee and Kim 2015). Wellness tourism is regarded as a sub-category of health tourism, and it is characterized as the

sum of relationships and phenomena arising from travel activities undertaken by people who are motivated by the promotion of health (Mueller and Kaufmann 2001). The GWI (2023) defined wellness tourism as active actions taken by tourists to maintain a healthy lifestyle, reduce stress, prevent disease, and enhance well-being. This study focuses on wellness tourism rather than medical tourism.

Motivations for wellness tourism have evolved through a variety of theoretical perspectives. Crompton's (1979) push and pull theory provides a foundational framework, distinguishing intrinsic drivers (e.g., stress relief) from destination attributes (e.g., natural environment) (Crompton 1979). Push factors (intrinsic drives) include, for adults, stress relief and psychological refreshing (“renewal feeling”) (Sthapit et al. 2023), and self-improvement through activities such as retreats (Naidoo et al. 2023). Empirical evidence consistently confirms the pursuit of wellness as a core motivator (Chen et al. 2013). Support for that finding was provided by Mak et al. (2009) summary of the motivations for wellness tourism: seeking physical relaxation, pampering oneself, rewarding oneself for hard work, seeking mental peace, and getting away from work and social life stress. Similarly, Voigt et al. (2011) derived six main motivations for wellness tourism from their study of wellness clientele: transcendence; physical health and appearance; escape and relaxation; important others and novelty; rebuilding self-esteem; and indulgence. Chen et al. (2008) found that in addition to health, relaxation, pursuing a variety of activities, and enjoying nature were the top four motivations of wellness travelers. Several demand-side studies also emphasized that relaxation and recuperation were the main motivations for enjoying a wellness holiday (Pesonen et al. 2011; Voigt et al. 2011). In general, a deeply relaxing and healthy experience is at the heart of what wellness tourists seek.

Pull factors, on the other hand, are external to the person, highlighting the benefits of a particular destination and determining where, when, and how the individual will holiday (Dann 1977). They are the factors that draw visitors to a particular destination (Kim and Lee 2002). Jang and Wu (2006) concluded that, based on the findings of most studies, the common denominator of the push factors includes knowledge-seeking, relaxation, and family reunion, while the pull factors are the most common natural and historical environment, cost, facilities, safety, and accessibility. For wellness tourism, the pull factors (destination attributes) include natural environments and specialized adult spa or massage facilities, etc. (Bočkus et al. 2023). The hardware facilities of destinations (e.g., hotel decoration or luxury surroundings) are often less important to wellness tourists than their internal meditation environment and their personal journey (Kelly 2012).

Notably, Sthapit et al. (2023) recently advanced the field by identifying “experiential co-creation” and “environmental congruence” as key prerequisites for memorable wellness experiences. However, their research is largely based on individual travelers, and these factors may be transformed in the family context: for example, “co-creation” may be transformed into “environmental congruence” (parents and children co-designing wellness activities), and “environmental coherence” requires an expansion of the space to include keeping children safe. This aligns with the observation from Weerakit and Tkachuk (2024) that service

preferences diverge when accommodating multi-age groups in international wellness tourism contexts. Intergenerational issues in the family fundamentally change the motivational structure of the study, but this remains unexamined in existing research and will be one of the focuses of this study.

It has been noted that the behavior of Chinese wellness tourists is similar to that of Western tourists, who prefer to experience wellness tourism in a high-quality natural environment (Huang and Xu 2014). Before 2018, when the Chinese government issued its “Healthy China” plan, China’s wellness market focused on and served the needs of the elderly. As people became more health-conscious, the market shifted as a diverse group of consumers emerged (Ziping 2019). Demand from tourists for “mindfulness education” is increasing, and people become more aware of mental health (Li 2021). Meanwhile, more younger people prefer to stay in a destination for a longer time and experience holistic physical and mental treatments (DTZ Research Institute 2020).

China’s natural and cultural resources are an important foundation for the development of wellness tourism products in China (Heung and Kucukusta 2013). Despite China’s rich resources for wellness tourism, Kucukusta and Heung (2012) pointed to a lack of professional service providers, a lack of platforms for key players to collaborate, and a lack of professional facilities and attractions as the main barriers to the development of wellness tourism in China. Compared with ten years ago, recent several years, the Chinese government has issued a number of policy documents emphasizing the acceleration of the development of wellness tourism and is committed to establishing national wellness tourism demonstration zones (Pan et al. 2024). But at the same time, Pan et al. (2024) also pointed out that there is still a lack of leading enterprises and high-end featured projects, as well as professional talents to support the industry, and the imbalance in the development of China’s eastern and western regions, especially in western China’s recuperation tourism infrastructure is still lagging behind. In addition, there is no systematic evaluation system for the development of wellness tourism destinations (Duan and Li 2019; Ziping 2019). Therefore, China’s wellness tourism industry is growing rapidly, but not on a large scale (Ziping 2019).

Reviewing prior studies of wellness tourism indicates that only a few articles and studies have specifically focused on China-related wellness resources or types of tourists. Most of the China-related studies on wellness tourism have focused on Hong Kong (Tsai et al. 2012), and there has been a lack of research on mainland China. The study of Bama in Guangxi by Huang and Xu (2014) is one of the more prominent in the literature on wellness tourism in mainland China, but it focused on longevity. A specific understanding of the wellness tourism market and its tourists’ needs in mainland China remains lacking.

Scholars have also conducted various in-depth studies that provide reference values for the market segmentation of wellness tourism. Current research exhibits three interconnected gaps: theoretical neglect of intergenerational motivation dynamics, cultural oversight of Chinese family-wellness linkages beyond longevity tourism (Huang and Xu 2014), and methodological absence of child voice capture (Poria and Timothy 2014). This

study’s focus on mainland Chinese families addresses this triad holistically.

2.2 | Family Travel With Children

Family tourism is considered to be the most common and most complex child tourism pattern (Feng and Li 2016). The family segment, like other segments of the tourism market, seeks diverse experiences (Schänzel and Yeoman 2015). Lehto et al. (2012) identified seven types of family trips: “urban interests,” “shopping,” “dining and entertainment,” “active nature pursuits,” “family social activities,” “skill-based outdoor sports,” and “farm activities.” Destinations that offer relaxation, novelty, outdoor activities, and arts and heritage sites are popular among families (Schänzel and Yeoman 2015). Adventure activities are also popular on family trips because they help children to be physically and mentally active and healthy (Pomfret 2021). Western families prioritize skill-based physical activities (e.g., swimming and skiing), reflecting individual achievement values (Pomfret 2021), while for Asian families, the focus tends to be on educational activities (Khoo-Lattimore and Yang 2018). And besides, education, Chinese families favor Confucian edutainment—blending wellness practices like herbal workshops with subtle moral cultivation (Wu et al. 2019).

One of the most common reasons people give for taking a holiday is to “reduce stress.” In the pleasant company of the family, people want relief from daily stress and household chores, with time for recovery and rest (Gram 2005). Family travel has several benefits for the development of family relationships, such as a shared holiday experience that encourages more “we” rather than “I” thinking (Lehto et al. 2009).

However, sometimes family holidays can be challenging, because family trips have to combine the needs and wishes of different members of the family, such as the needs of parents and children, younger children, and older children (Gram 2005). In addition, some aspects of traveling may harm family cohesion, such as family members not having as much independent space as at home (Lehto et al. 2012). In families with young children, parents have to care for the children, and holidays may increase stress for parents (Backer and Schänzel 2013; Gram 2005). Parents traveling with children may also have specific requirements or limitations regarding travel time, the distance to the destination, and hotel facilities (suitable accommodation) (Backer and Schänzel 2013; Khoo-Lattimore and Yang 2018).

This complexity reflects the self-determination theory (SDT) paradox in family tourism: parents’ pursuit of autonomy (through independent relaxation activities) often conflicts with children’s need for relatedness (via family bonding or peer interaction) (Ryan and Deci 2000). This autonomy-belonging conflict is particularly pronounced in health tourism, where parental demand for “effective wellness” (e.g., adherence to a meditation program) may further constrict children’s space/time for exploring interactions with parents. While family tourism studies increasingly acknowledge children’s agency (Poria and Timothy 2014), wellness-specific research remains adult-centric, particularly in non-Western contexts where intergenerational wellness beliefs shape a unique family tourism approach.

2.3 | Decision-Making for Destination Selection

It is complex to understand family motivation because each member has different demands (Pomfret 2021). Parents want to enjoy family time and achieve emotional connection (Carr 2011; Gram 2005) whereas young children seek immersive sensory experiences (Gram 2005). Differences in the social and cultural identities of families and their members, and changes in identity as individuals, couples, small groups and entire families interact with each other in complex ways in the decision-making process, also affect the process of constructing family decisions (Epp and Price 2008; Wang and Li 2021).

Household purchase decisions (including holiday decisions) are divided into three stages: problem identification, information gathering, and final decision-making (Davis and Rigaux 1974). Research on family travel decisions has focused on the role of parents. Many scholars categorize the types of decision-making in families as husband-led, wife-led, and shared decision-making (Nichols and Snepenger 1988). Families not only need to make decisions about the destination but also make sub-decisions such as the type of activities, accommodation, food and drink, and transportation (Kang and Hsu 2004). Wellness tourism complicates this staged model through “health imperative overrides”—when a member’s wellness needs (e.g., parents’ spa schedule or child-friendly accommodation) disrupt conventional decision sequences, demanding immediate itinerary adjustments (Sthapit et al. 2023).

Generally, parents believe that children have a degree of influence on decisions about family holidays, but that the decision is in the parents’ hands (Kang and Hsu 2004). Children, however, believe that they have a fairly high level of influence (Gram 2007). Curtale (2018) pointed out that even though there are differences between parents’ and children’s activity preferences, parents give priority to their children’s preferences or needs and adjust their final decisions accordingly. Furthermore, as children have become more experienced customers than ever before, researchers no longer regard them simply as passive receivers (Obrador 2012). Some scholars have suggested that children with a strong desire to travel are more likely to act as initiators in the family decision-making process (Wang and Li 2021).

As China’s overall economy improves, combined with the traditional Chinese focus on family life, family tourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the modern Chinese tourism industry (Wu and Wall 2016). Modern Chinese children often travel with their core families and have a wealth of travel experiences (Wu et al. 2019). Research in China on consumer behavior and demand for household tourism began in the last decade, mainly focusing on the factors influencing household tourism consumption decisions and behavioral analysis of household tourism consumption, but the characteristics of family tourism as a consumer group still need to be further explored (Jiang 2017; Tang et al. 2017). Thus, as noted above, there is a gap in the research on Chinese households’ consumption of wellness tourism.

Scholars have long been interested in family tourism and have studied it from many perspectives, including sociology, psychology, and children’s participation in decision-making. The family decision-making process model has been cited in many articles and used for in-depth research and validation. However, relatively few academic studies related to family tourism have been conducted in Asia, especially China, compared with Europe and North America. This Chinese context remains critically underexplored: while Western studies highlight children’s recreational influence (Gram 2007), Asian research overlooks their agency in health-driven decisions—a gap magnified by China’s unique culture and health pursuit habits in tourism (Wu et al. 2019). The present study focused on family travel in China, to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations of this group and the key factors affecting family travel in China.

2.4 | Theoretical Integration: Current Gaps in Family Wellness Decision Research

Existing theoretical approaches to family tourism decision-making and wellness tourism motivations operate in separate scholarly silos, each leaving critical gaps when applied to family wellness travel contexts. The dominant family decision-making models, rooted in consumer behavior research (Davis and Rigaux 1974; Kang and Hsu 2004), effectively map conventional vacation choices but fail to account for how wellness-specific considerations, such as relaxing/wellness facility requirements or conflicting wellness priorities between parents and children, reshape traditional decision hierarchies. Conversely, wellness tourism frameworks (Sthapit et al. 2023; Voigt et al. 2011) provide robust tools for analyzing individual experiences yet systematically overlook the negotiation processes required when wellness activities involve diverse family members with divergent needs.

This theoretical disconnect manifests most acutely in three underexplored areas: (1) the asymmetrical influence of children’s health-aware preferences on destination selection, which challenges parental authority; (2) the conditional concession patterns where parents override their own wellness plans to accommodate children’s needs while maintaining wellness trip objectives; and (3) the real-time activity adaptation required to reconcile family member differences in wellness definitions during the trip itself. While Decrop and Snelders’ (2005) situational decision model acknowledges external contingencies, it lacks the granularity to address health-specific family dynamics. Similarly, wellness tourism studies’ emphasis on post hoc experience evaluation (Chen et al. 2013) leaves unexamined the pre-trip decision processes factors unique to family contexts.

These gaps collectively reveal a fundamental theoretical gap: family decision models assume static authority structures, while wellness tourism research presumes unified individual motivations, neither accounting for the dynamic, health-mediated power renegotiations that characterize family wellness travel. This persistent bifurcation between studies of how families decide and research on why people pursue wellness travel creates

a theoretical blind spot precisely where these domains intersect: in understanding how nuclear families navigate health-motivated trip planning and execution. The current literature offers no integrated framework to analyze these multi-family members' wellness negotiations, which factors would influence the wellness tourism destination choice.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Approach

Smith et al. (1994) suggested that behaviors and meanings can help to understand and explain phenomena, so the aim of this study was to explain the phenomenon of wellness tourism in terms of the behaviors and meanings that family health tourism clientele with children bring to it. The grounded theory method of qualitative research was used because its interpretive and exploratory approach can help to reveal the factors that influence families with children to choose wellness travel (Stake 2010).

Compared with biographical research, phenomenological research, ethnography, and case studies, the grounded theory method, considered the most scientific methodology in qualitative research, is also considered the most applicable method for theory building and is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena (Charmaz 2008). This approach centers on generating theories from the data rather than existing theories, thus ensuring that the findings closely match the actual phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss 2017).

In this study, we focus on the decision-making process of family wellness tourism in the context of intergenerational interactions and the factors that influence it. The grounded theory method allows us the flexibility to adjust the pace of interviews according to the interviewees during the research process, better adapting to changing interview needs (Corbin 2021). Thus, during data collection, we constantly compared the expressions of different family members, and during analysis, we constantly compared new data with existing theories to validate and extend the research findings (Charmaz 2008). This iterative process not only increased the depth and breadth of the study but also ensured the reliability and validity of the findings.

Based on the specificity of this topic (there is a large research base on wellness tourism or family tourism, just that there is a gap in cross-study), the preference is for employing the procedural grounded theory method (i.e., with a certain preconceived foundation but still fully exploring the causality implied in the data) when adopting the grounded theory method to conduct the research. Furthermore, utilizing interviews with multiple families for data collection introduces an inevitable interaction with the respondents. This aligns with Charmaz (2017), who posits that this interaction is also a product of multiple constructs.

Through this approach, we were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the various factors and their interrelationships in the decision-making process of family wellness

tourism, thus providing strong support for theory development and practical application.

3.2 | Sampling Process

The theoretical sampling method was applied to collect and analyze data from respondents, ensuring alignment with the study's exploratory aim of uncovering family-specific factors in wellness tourism. Theoretical sampling, which requires the researcher to reason inductively and retrospectively, is a central tenet of grounded theory and is necessary for any grounded theory research (Corbin 2021; Glaser and Strauss 2017). This research applied the logic of theoretical sampling by looking at surprising or anomalous data from interviews, searching for new theories, and returning to the interviews for further data to test and confirm inferences (Conlon et al. 2020). For instance, if a new factor related to children's health consciousness emerged during an interview, the next set of interviews could be designed to delve deeper into this aspect or seek additional cases where this factor might be more prominent. This flexibility in sampling is crucial for ensuring that the final theory is well-developed. This method was particularly suited to the study's context because family wellness tourism is an underexplored area, and pre-defined sampling criteria might overlook critical nuances (Charmaz 2008).

A theoretical sample of the "accessible" population was used first to establish an informed theory (Conlon et al. 2020). The so-called 'accessible population' refers to the group of people we can find suitable families through social media platforms (e.g., WeChat Moments and Rednote-Xiaohongshu) by posting invitations for interviews and through referrals from friends and colleagues. During this process, we made efforts to reach out to families in different cities and with diverse occupational backgrounds to ensure a certain level of diversity among the interviewees. The households interviewed were organized around the interviewers' main base cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Jinan, across mainland China.

3.3 | Interview Process

To ensure the comfort and convenience of the interviews, we prioritized face-to-face interviews and conducted them in participants' homes or cafes. However, some of the interviews were conducted by telephone or video due to distance and other issues. Meanwhile, the interviewers informed respondents that the interviews would also need audio-recorded for research and content organization purposes. A traditional question-and-answer interview format was combined with a narrative interview to develop in-depth communication and facilitate the expression of the experiences of the interviewees involved in activities (Kelly et al. 2010).

To confirm the representativeness of the study sample, we conducted initial screening interviews. These interviews were primarily aimed at confirming whether participants met the main eligibility criterion, which was participation in wellness tourism. The screening interviews included the following questions:

1. What do you think of wellness tourism?
2. Do you have a demand for wellness tourism?
3. How often do you take part in wellness tourism activities?
4. Have you ever participated in or organized wellness tourism with family members, especially with your children?

These screening questions helped us identify families with relevant wellness tourism experience as our target group. The screening interviews typically lasted about 15min and focused on the participants' wellness tourism experiences and related needs.

During the family interviews, the authors paid particular attention to make sure that all family members (both parents and children) were able to fully express their opinions. During the interviews, we realized that children might get bored or distracted by long interviews (Gram 2005; Poria and Timothy 2014). To cope with this challenge, flexible interview strategies was adopted, such as keeping the children's attention by taking short breaks or distributing snacks and fruits to the children (Gram 2005).

3.4 | Data Collection

The authors conducted semi-structured interviews for data collection. All family members were invited to participate in the interviews so that we could obtain an all-around view of their perceptions of wellness travel.

Following the screening questions mentioned previously and having identified families with wellness tourism experience as our target group, a series of interview questions (shown in Table 1) were asked of the participants to explore their thoughts on wellness tourism. Our question design sought to understand the reasons for families' choices from three perspectives: their direct responses, their actual choices, and their expectations of the destination (O'Leary and Deegan 2005). We chose nuclear families (consisting of parents and children) with children aged 6–14years old as the primary research population for this study (Poria and Timothy 2014). This age range was chosen because children around the age of six are already able to express themselves to a certain extent. In contrast, younger children are perceived to play a more passive role in family decision-making (Poria and Timothy 2014), while in China, individuals aged 15years and above are classified as youths and some of them may try to emphasize that they are independent of their parents (Blichfeldt et al. 2011). Meanwhile, as the focus of this study, the views of the parents of these families were also fully considered in the in-depth interviews.

If the children in the families interviewed are too young to answer these questions systematically, the author guided the children to illustrate them in the form of storytelling. In addition, there are several questions for the children separately:

1. Do you like to go to the beach or into the forest and be close to nature?
2. Do you like to spend time with your parents in the spa?
3. Would you like it if the hotel staff took you to practice yoga or grow vegetables together?

TABLE 1 | The outline of the interview questions.

Questions
1. How do you think wellness-oriented family tourism differs from regular family tourism?
2. What scenario/why would you like to take on a wellness trip?
3. Why do you want to go on a wellness-type trip with your family members?
4. What factors may limit or guide you in making your final travel plans?
5. Why did you choose the last wellness tourism destination for your family?
6. What activities did you participate in during your last trip? Why did you choose to participate in these activities?
7. What activities have you arranged for your child to take part in? Or what activities have they volunteered for? Why do you want them to participate in these activities?
8. What do you think you have gained from your last trip?
9. What do you think about the children's experience and role in this trip?
10. Overall, in what ways did the trip meet your expectations? Or what factors do you think influenced your expectations of this trip?
11. How did you take care of the children on the trip (mainly you, your partner, or you together)? What kinds of support or amenities do you think are helpful that the destination provided? Which support were you most satisfied with?

4. Do you like hiking or playing sports with friends? Or does it have to be mum and dad?

Guided by the theoretical sampling technique, data collection and data analysis were carried out in parallel. Based on the theoretical analyses of the interview data, if new categories begin to emerge, we continued to sample participants based on these emerging categories in the pursuit of category saturation and theory (Conlon et al. 2020). Data saturation was determined through an iterative process of coding and thematic analysis. We posted interview requests via social media. Finally, fifty-one families agreed to participate in the interviews and 31 families passed the screening process. Among them, after interviewing 28 families, we observed that no new themes or subcategories emerged in subsequent interviews, and existing codes were sufficiently replicated across participants. This indicated that additional data would not substantially alter the findings, confirming saturation (Mason 2010). To validate this, we conducted three additional interviews, which further reinforced the stability of the identified themes. Overall, total 31 families were interviewed.

3.5 | Data Analysis

To ensure linguistic accuracy and conceptual equivalence between the Chinese interview content and the English transcription, a rigorous back-to-back translation validation process was applied. Using back-translation in cross-cultural

research is commonly to ensure accuracy and consistency of translation, especially when dealing with qualitative data (Bu et al. 2021). First, a member of the research team (including one with Chinese-English bilingual skills) manually translated the Chinese interview content into English. Subsequently, another independent translator with equivalent linguistic competence back-translated the English version into Chinese without access to the original Chinese text. This process followed a back-translation validation method widely recognized in academia to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the translation. The research team compared the differences between the original text and the back-translated text systematically, discussing corrections for culturally specific vocabulary and oral expressions to minimize semantic loss and ensure conceptual consistency.

Creswell and Poth (2016) suggested that computers can be used as a tool for analyzing qualitative data. We transcribed the interviews, which were conducted in Mandarin, and then translated the transcriptions into English, which was eventually imported into NVivo for encoding. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12 through a three-stage grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2008). In the open coding stage, we conducted line-by-line analysis to identify initial concepts (e.g., “child-friendly activities”). During axial coding, related codes were systematically grouped into broader categories (e.g., “Health Pursuit” with sub-codes differentiating physical and mental health dimensions), with connections between categories mapped using NVivo’s matrix coding function to compare parent and child responses. The selective coding phase involved refining core themes (e.g., “Intergenerational Solitude”) through iterative merging of overlapping categories and validation via research team discussions. In addition to this, NVivo’s memo function was fully utilized to record reflections and theoretical memos during the coding process to better explain and understand the relationships between these themes.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Demographic Data of the Participant Families

In total, we contacted over 50 families and attempted to interview them. After the first round of question screening and our relevant explanations, 20 families indicated that they had never participated in wellness tourism activities. Therefore, we conducted a second round of interviews with 31 eligible families to understand their motivations and needs for wellness tourism. Table 2 summarizes the basic demographic information of the participants in this study and the frequency of their family travels.

The families originated from 13 cities, including Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Jinan, which are first-tier cities or provincial capitals. Other cities, such as Linyi, Luoyang are the third-tier cities in mainland China. The length of the interview for each family was approximately 60–90 min (depending to a large extent on the level of involvement of the child). Only five of the families interviewed had two children participating in the interview with their parents, while the other 26 families all had only one

child interviewed with their parents. Overall, there were more boys than girls (22 boys and 14 girls). Regarding travel modes, self-organized travel (including self-driving and independent itineraries without tour operators) was the most common choice (71%), followed by package tours (20%) and hybrid arrangements (9%). This reflects families’ preference for flexibility in wellness tourism planning.”

To illustrate how raw data informed our grounded theory analysis, Table 3 showcases the representative examples of the NVivo coding process (see section data analysis for full methodology part). Table 4 then synthesizes the frequency and distribution of all emergent themes. Please note Table 3 demonstrates initial theory development, while Table 4 presents the final theoretical framework.

4.2 | Results of Grounded Theory Approach and Comparison With Previous Studies

The results of the three-tier coding methodology were analyzed to reveal specific themes, which were grouped and quantified with their associated patterns (subcategories). Table 3 details the themes and subcategories that emerged and compares the responses of parents and children.

Research on family holiday decision-making has focused on three typical decision-making stages: problem identification, information-seeking behavior, and alternative evaluation (Rojas-de-Gracia et al. 2018). This study focuses on the factors that lead to the choice of wellness tourism as the destination when the family group makes the final decision, that is, the diversified choice decision.

According to the model proposed by (Decrop and Snelders 2005), four factors play a role in influencing travel decisions: environmental (cultural, social, and geophysical), personal (age, family status, occupation, personality, and lifestyle), interpersonal (individual factors), and situational. But in terms of family travel decisions, Decrop and Snelders (2005) do not believe that environmental factors such as cultural values have a large impact on family travel decisions. The interview results of this study indicate that family members’ pursuit of a healthy lifestyle (personal factors), the social needs of adult parents, and interpersonal factors such as the need to enhance relationships with family members all influence decision-making about family wellness travel. Situational factors (such as the collision of traditional and modern Chinese cultures and the influence of social media) also have an impact on family travel decisions.

4.3 | Factors Influencing the Choice of Wellness Tourism Destinations for Families

Authors have identified five main factors that influence families’ choices of wellness tourism destinations, which can be categorized into three types: main factors, key factors, and moderators. The key factor, such as the pursuit of health, is a fundamental motivation that directly influences the decision-making process. The main factors, including pursuing intergenerational solitude and parents’ expectations of their

TABLE 2 | The demographic data of the participant families.

No.	Parents age range	Kids age	Kids gender	City	Frequency of wellness tourism trips	Primary travel mode
F1	40–45	11	Boy	Guangzhou	Above once a quarter	Self-organized travel
F2	30–35	13	Boy	Liaocheng	Every month for suburbs wellness trips Longer trips at least once a year	Package tour
F3	35–40	12	Boy	Huizhou	5–6 times a year	Self-organized travel
F4	45–50	13	Boy	Changchun	Once a year	Package tour
F5	35–40	11	Girl	Guangzhou	1–2 times a year	Self-organized travel
F6	30–35	11	Girl	Zhanjiang	Average of five or six times a year	Self-organized travel
F7	45–50	15	Boy	Guangzhou	For shorter trips, we'd probably go every 2 weeks For longer trips, 2 times a year	Self-organized travel
F8	35–40	12	Girl	Guangzhou	Around 2 times per year	Self-organized travel
F9	40–45	15 & 11	Girls	Guangzhou	About 1–2 times a year	Hybrid travel (part of the trip is with a tour group, part of the trip is done independently)
F10	45–50	15	Boy	Guangzhou	Longer distances about once a year Short distance trips are organized once a month	Self-organized travel
F11	45–50	15 & 8	Girl & boy	Guangzhou	Six times a year if short spa trips are included	Self-organized travel
F12	40–45	14	Boy	Harbin	About two times a year	Package tour
F13	35–40	13	Boy	Huizhou	Above once a month we will organize a trip	Self-organized travel
F14	35–40	15 & 12	Boys	Luoyang	1 or 2 times a year for longer trips Every month we also go to the hot springs	Self-organized travel
F15	30–35	11 & 6	Boy & girl	Huizhou	Once or twice a year	Hybrid travel
F16	40–45	15	Girl	Guangzhou	About two or three times a year	Self-organized travel
F17	40–45	8	Girl	Yantai	Once a year for a long trip	Self-organized travel
F18	40–45	12	Boy	Guangzhou	Three or four times a year, up to 3 or 4 days	Package tour
F19	50–55	12	Boy	Guangzhou	About one or two times a year	Self-organized travel
F20	35–40	11	Girl	Sanya	Multiple times a year	Self-organized travel
F21	40–45	15	Boy	Shenzhen	Go to the spa every 2–3 months	Self-organized travel
F22	35–40	10	Boy	Shenzhen	Travels roughly five or six times a year	Hybrid travel
F23	40–45	11	Boy	Jinan	1–2 times a year, in the summer holidays	Self-organized travel
F24	35–40	8 & 7	Boys	Jinan	3–4 times per year at least	Self-organized travel

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

No.	Parents age range	Kids age	Kids gender	City	Frequency of wellness tourism trips	Primary travel mode
F25	50–55	15	Boy	Jinan	Once or twice a year	Self-organized travel
F26	40–45	13	Boy	Jinan	Once or twice a year	Package tour
F27	30–35	9	Boy	Jinan	Once or twice a year, in the summer holidays	Self-organized travel
F28	25–30	8	Girl	Linyi	1–2 times per year	Package tour
F29	30–35	6	Girl	Linyi	Once a year	Self-organized travel
F30	30–35	6	Girl	Nanchang	Three or four times per year	Self-organized travel
F31	35–40	7	Girl	Shenzhen	Frequency is about 3–5 times a year	Self-organized travel

Note: Self-organized includes self-driving and fully independent travel; Hybrid combines self-organized activities with group tour elements.

children's development, are central to understanding why families choose certain wellness tourism destinations. These factors reflect the core motivations and needs of families when selecting a destination. The moderators, such as collectivist cultures and the conflict between modern and traditional culture, as well as social media, influence the strength and direction of the relationship between the main factors and the final decision. These moderators shape the context in which decisions are made and can affect how families perceive and prioritize different factors. Each type of factor plays a distinct role in the decision-making process, contributing to the complexity of family wellness tourism choices.

4.3.1 | Factor 1: Multi-Age (Downward Compatible) Health Pursuits: Ripples From Adults' to Children's Health Pursuits

4.3.1.1 | Parents' Concerns About Physical and Mental Health. In the family health tourism scenario, the parents focused more on expressing their needs, such as for stress release and physical and mental health, than on centering their children's needs for entertainment and companionship as in traditional family tourism. It is worth noting that although this claim is commonplace in studies related to wellness tourism (Kelly 2012), it is a new finding in the study of family motivation to travel. In particular, the adults (parents) diversified their healing through activities such as yoga, hiking, outdoor sports, forest oxygen therapy, and spa treatments.

4.3.1.2 | The Rise of Health Consciousness Among Children. Children's quest for health has not been highlighted in previous research on wellness tourism. However, the interviews suggested that older children are beginning to develop a sense of concern for their health. Three children between the ages of 11 and 15 expressed the view that "traveling close to nature can help me relax from the stress of studying, otherwise I feel very tense." Another boy from F25 (15 years old) said "I used to think that playing electronic games was a way to relax from my study stress. However, I found that this only led to another kind of tiredness, whereas meditation or solitude in nature was more effective, even if it

was only for two or three days." Younger children may not be aware of the deliberate pursuit of health, but they may subconsciously gravitate towards these types of activities, such as the child in F5 who mentioned, "I really like the hot springs, especially in the winter when it's so cold, and the hot springs make me feel so good." Furthermore, the parents were equally concerned about their children's health. This was especially true for parents of children who were about to sit exams, one of whom said, "although he thought it was a waste of time, I still wanted to take him out to relax from the pressure of studying, which will help him to be better engaged in his studies" (F26). The parents played a driving role in helping their children to relax.

Notably, the findings reveal a new trend: older children are beginning to develop their own health consciousness, actively seeking relaxation and stress relief through nature-based experiences. This emerging awareness among children has not been highlighted in previous wellness tourism research. Overall, while parents remain the primary drivers of wellness tourism decisions, the growing health awareness among older children represents a significant and novel factor influencing family choices in wellness tourism destinations.

4.3.2 | Factor 2: Pursuing Intergenerational Solitude

Although previous studies have discussed intergenerational solitude and the negotiation of differences and conflicts among family members during travel, this study further reveals that, within the context of wellness tourism, young parents demonstrate a particularly salient and conscious pursuit of intergenerational solitude (Albanese and Bocci 2019; Schänzel and Yeoman 2015). It includes the need for intergenerational spatial solitude, "self-seeking," novel experiences, and independent socializing.

4.3.2.1 | Parents Turn Inward to Care for Themselves. On the one hand, this factor has some similarities with the "self-seeking" motivation of tourism mentioned by other scholars (Kelly 2012; Mak et al. 2009), as the interviewees mentioned that they would like to practice their hobbies or improve themselves in terms of knowledge or mindfulness

TABLE 3 | Grounded theory coding process example.

Theoretical categories	Sub-categories	Initial codes	Conceptualization	Show original interview transcript sentences
Multi-age (downward compatible) health pursuits	Pursuing Mental Health	Recharge your mind	Seeking a brief break to start again	It's a resource for the mind, to be precise, to give your heart a place to relax and breathe, and then when you go back to work you'll have a breathing space, you can't be energized all the time, do you?
		Psychological Religious Trust	Talking and opening the heart	For example, if I go to Nanshan Temple, sometimes when I am upset or have a knot in my heart, I will go and talk to the abbot
		Seeking spiritual relaxation	Achieving spiritual purification	I feel that when I sit alone and think about nothing, it seems like my mind and body are relaxed, and then when I have to think about something again, I may think more clearly
	
	Releasing stress	Balancing work stress	Need to release work stress	It's time to go out and relax when work gets stressful. Clients won't be rushed if we are on holiday
		Relieving study stress	Empty one's mind from study	For example, if I want to go out in the summer holiday, my basic driving force is that I want to go out to relieve the study pressure, I simply want to empty myself. When I go to a quiet place in the mountains, I can just find a place where no one is around and stand for a while
		Helping children to relax	Need to take children to relax mentally Taking children to relax in nature	It doesn't matter what age they are, children actually need a break from school and they need a change of scenery and a break from their minds The children work hard at school and are under a lot of pressure, so they want to take them out to relax in a natural and peaceful environment
	
	Pursuing physical well-being	Preventing disease	Health consciousness awakening	It was only after the epidemic that we started to have this consciousness about our health, especially after the epidemic was no longer under control and it felt like there was no government to forcefully protect your health, we even felt anxious about it, and this is how my viewpoint has changed and we started to take care to protect ourselves from infection
		Improving physical function	Healthy Eating	In destinations where health is the key, you can't help but eat healthier in that environment
	

during wellness tourism. On the other hand, due to the more fixed and limited scope of travel destinations, wellness tourism destinations can help parents and children achieve intergenerational spatial independence. Parents are more confident in letting their children play on their own or participate in various activities organized by a resort while adults can have space to spend time alone to take part in their own favorite activities.

4.3.2.2 | Children's Need for Independent Social Circles. In contrast to what we had expected, the demand for independent space was expressed not only by the parents but also by the children, who desired to “pursue freedom.” Although some of the younger children mentioned that they did not want to be away from their parents at all during the trip, most of the children said that they preferred to play with their peers in their

TABLE 4 | The main influences in the decision-making process.

Theoretical categories	Sub - categories	Initial codes	Parents	Children	
Multi-age (downward compatible) health pursuits	Pursuing mental health	To recharge ourselves to better continue living and working	9		
		Seeking the peace of mind that comes with religious attachment	2		
		Prevention of mental illness	1		
		Seek balance in mental rhythms (sense of relaxation)	9		
	Pursuing physical health	Seeking a comfortable living environment and getting physical rest or exercise	25		
		Preventing Diseases	2		
		Releasing stress	Ease the pressure of learning		3
			Taking the kids to relax	6	
			Relieving work stress	12	
	Pursuing intergenerational solitude	Intergenerational spaces of solitude	The pursuit of time or space for solitude such as meditating, lazing or reading alone	7	
Independent socializing			Self-improvement	7	
		Children's Circle Play and Leisure		4	
		Casual socializing for parents and friends	9		
		Pursuit of selfhood	Pursuit of freedom		2
		Pursuit of self-interest and experience	2		
Children's development	Child-friendliness facilities	Novelty experience	3	2	
		The request for child-friendliness of amusement facilities	The request for child-friendliness of amusement facilities	17	
			The request for children's preferred activities	20	
		Character building of the children	Promoting children's exposure to the real world	6	
	Fostering children's cognitive and social integrity		8		
		Cultivating good qualities in children	2		
	Children's knowledge acquisition	Helping children broaden their horizons	4		
		Learning and accumulation of knowledge	3	2	

(Continues)

TABLE 4 | (Continued)

Theoretical categories	Sub - categories	Initial codes	Parents	Children
Collectivist cultures	Destination city image	Urban rhythm	5	
		Urban safety	18	
		City comfort	15	6
	Family relationship enhancement	Reconstruction or enhancement of family member relationships	14	
	Balance of multiple claims	Wellness tourism can cater to different members of the family	4	
	Escape from daily life	Regulating the pace of life	15	
Stay away from the city life		7	3	
Social media	Communicative social media	The impact of WeChat moment shares or friend invitations	7	
	Share-based social media	Reflections of social impact	1	
		Decide on the final choice through social media reviews	11	

social circle in a scenario of wellness tourism where the destination is relatively fixed. For example the child from Family 2 mentioned, “I don’t necessarily need my mom and dad to play with me when I go on a trip, but it’s better to have kids my age to play with, like we can go boating together, go on helicopter rides and all of those things, which I really like.” But for some dangerous activities, the children from F3 and F4 mentioned that “I would have to need my mom and dad with me if I was going to do dangerous activities like roller coasters or paragliding.”

4.3.3 | Factor 3: Parents’ Expectations of Their Children’s Development

4.3.3.1 | Parents’ Requirements of Destinations. Parents focusing on their children’s development and aspirations is not an exceptional finding in family travel. In this study, more than 90% of the interviewed families mentioned this factor. The parents considered it just as important for a wellness tourism destination to be child-friendly as it was for the parents themselves to have a good wellness experience. Parents must always stay with their children if there are no child-friendly facilities or activities. Therefore, they viewed the availability of child-friendly facilities at the destination as a necessity.

4.3.3.2 | Building Children’s Characters. Wellness destinations offer children a more diverse range of activities, whether it be spending time with their peers or participating in various outdoor activities. As a result, children have opportunities to develop their social communication skills. The parents believed that taking their children on more trips could foster positive character development, such as broad-mindedness through diverse exposures, and responsibility and courage through interactive or nature-based activities. However, they stressed that they did not consider that this can be achieved only through wellness tourism, but that all types of travel can contribute to the positive character development of children.

4.3.3.3 | Achieving Learning and Social Experience Accumulation for Children. Parents also expect their children to learn something while traveling, although it may not necessarily be from books. Most of the parents mentioned this. For example: “Sometimes we also set some goals for the children, like how many museums there are, and what kind of museum this one is, or I want to try to let them go to learn more about culture” (F17). Interestingly, two of the children interviewed also expressed a desire to learn something while traveling. The children from F15, emphasized that “even though this kind of tour you’re talking about doesn’t take me everywhere, I actually like it because it’s not tiring and there are lots of interesting things to do.”

4.3.4 | Factor 4: Collectivist Cultures and the Conflict Between Modern and Traditional Culture

Some scholars who have studied the characteristics of family travel in China have emphasized that Chinese culture is collectivist, rather than the “individual influencing the collective,” and that this contributes to the formation of harmonious group relationships among Chinese families when traveling (Correia et al. 2011; Wang and Li 2021). This collectivist orientation acts as a moderating factor in family wellness travel decisions because it shapes how parents balance their own health pursuits with the needs and preferences of their children. Even in the context of wellness tourism, a type of travel where parents are especially concerned with their own health development, parents still consider their children’s preferences when choosing the destination. This reflects the collectivist value of prioritizing family harmony and ensuring that all family members’ needs are met.

However, the influence of a collectivist culture on family wellness travel is limited or moderated due to the modern demand for intergenerational solitude for both parents and

children. These limited influences include motivations to enhance family relationships, destination image considerations, balancing multiple demands, and a collective exodus from daily life. While parents value family togetherness, they also seek personal space and independent activities to recharge and focus on their own well-being. This dual need creates a unique dynamic where parents balance their desire for solitude with their commitment to family cohesion. For example, many parents think that they do not have enough time to spend with their children in daily life, so they hope to achieve the enhancement of family relations while traveling. At the same time, they also seek destinations that provide opportunities for independent activities, such as wellness retreats that offer both family-oriented and adult-only sessions. One parent mentioned, “We chose this destination because it has a nice spa for us and a kids’ club where our children can have fun and make new friends” (F14). This illustrates how collectivist values influence the selection of destinations that cater to the needs of all family members while also providing opportunities for individual wellness experiences.

In summary, collectivist culture acts as a moderating factor by influencing parents to prioritize family harmony and balance their own health pursuits with the needs of their children. This balance is achieved through the selection of destinations that offer both family-oriented and individual wellness activities, ensuring that all family members can enjoy a fulfilling travel experience.

4.3.5 | Factor 5: Social Media, an Important Vehicle for the Construction of Tourism Circles

Two types of social media play a role in family wellness travel decisions: communicative social media and sharing social media. In China, parents usually use WeChat for communication, and many of them will be tempted to travel to a destination because they saw it on WeChat Moments. For example, one parent mentioned, “I saw my friend’s post about this amazing wellness resort on WeChat Moments, and it looked so relaxing. We decided to go there for our next family trip” (F7). This illustrates how communicative social media acts as a moderating factor by influencing parents’ perceptions of destinations through personal recommendations and shared experiences.

Well-connected parents will share travel destinations through group chats, which directly contributes to the selection of travel destinations. Sometimes parents will choose several families to travel together on a wellness trip to maximize intergenerational solitude because children and parents of families who know each other well will play or stay together in their social circles. This collaborative approach not only enhances the travel experience but also reinforces social bonds among families. For instance, one parent shared, “We decided to go on a wellness trip with another family we know. It made the trip more enjoyable and gave us a chance to share experiences and recommendations” (F11).

For sharing-based social media, the interviewed families said they used Little Red Book or TikTok most often. Often parents

are attracted to content promotions in videos when considering whether to travel to a particular destination. This demonstrates how sharing-based social media acts as a moderating factor by influencing parents’ decision-making through visual and user-generated content.

In summary, social media acts as a moderating factor in family wellness travel decisions by influencing parents’ perceptions of destinations through personal recommendations, shared experiences, and user-generated content. This influence helps parents make more informed decisions and enhances the overall travel experience by providing a platform for discovering and sharing new wellness opportunities.

4.4 | Proposed Framework

Based on the above analyses of categories and themes, a framework was designed to describe the relationships among them. Figure 1 illustrates the influencing factors for families with children choosing a wellness tourism destination. It can be seen that “pursuing health,” “pursuing intergenerational solitude,” and “focusing on children’s development” are the factors influencing parents’ choices. In addition, “collectivist culture” and “social media” are moderating factors influencing parents’ choice of family wellness travel. The solid arrows in the figure indicate the direct influences on families undertaking wellness tourism destinations, and the dashed arrows indicate the intrinsic influence relationship between the factors. For example, parents’ pursuit of spiritual wellness drives them to pursue intergenerational solitude (by finding space or time alone for spiritual relaxation and meditation).

5 | Discussion

5.1 | Considerations for Choosing a Wellness Tourism Destination

Based on the findings above, this section discusses the underlying reasons, theoretical implications, and practical significance of the results. As the question guideline in Table 1 shows, we asked “direct questions to families with children about their motivations for wellness tourism,” and “asked parents to consider the choice of wellness tourism destinations from a practical point of view or to recall their priorities when choosing a destination.” Parents were also asked to share their expectations of wellness tourism. These are three broad perspectives to diversify the understanding of the factors that influence families with children when they are choosing wellness tourism destinations. In turn, these dimensions of decision-making can help the market to better understand the target group of families with children.

The primary motivations for wellness tourism include the pursuit of physical and mental health, relaxation, escape from daily life, novelty, and self-discovery, which are consistent with previous research (Chen et al. 2013; Mak et al. 2009; Pesonen et al. 2011). Additionally, this study identifies unique motivations specific to family wellness tourism, such as enhancing family relationships, seeking educational experiences for children, and balancing multiple demands (Crompton 1979; Li et al. 2016). These findings

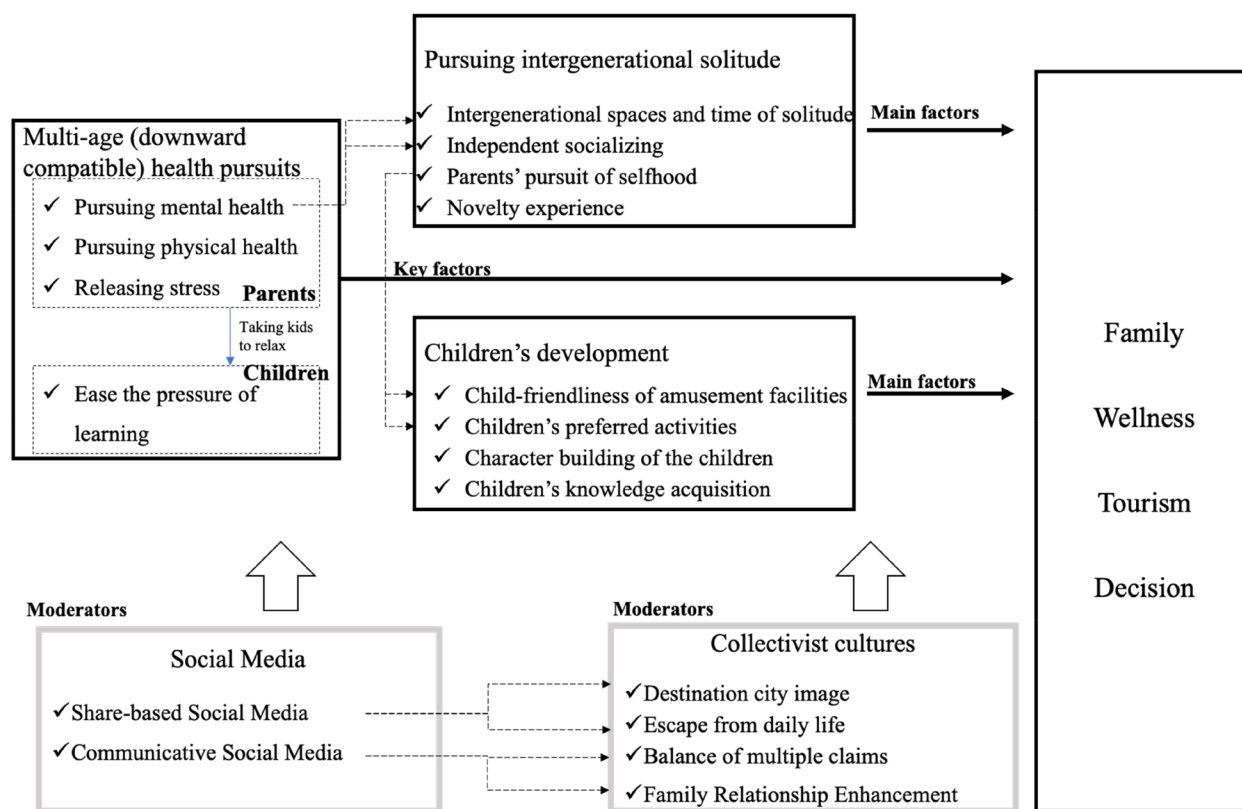


FIGURE 1 | A model of factors influencing family wellness tourism decision.

highlight the importance of considering children's needs in wellness tourism, suggesting that wellness tourism should focus on the health of adults and the holistic development of children.

Interestingly, the “desire to accompany the child” or “focus on the child's learning and development” mentioned by parents in their demands for destinations did not seem to be reflected in their chosen destinations. Instead, they focused more on whether the destination could provide parents with diversified wellness facilities, while child-related facilities were only considered as a basic package. Thus, the influence of collectivism, or “respect for elders,” was limited in the study group of nuclear families. It can be claimed that in wellness tourism, parents emphasize caring for themselves.

While Western literature on family tourism often highlights the importance of individual independence and the potential for intergenerational conflict due to differing needs and preferences (Albanese and Bocci 2019), Chinese family tourism has traditionally been associated with collectivist values, such as prioritizing family harmony and the needs of elders and children (Fu et al. 2021). However, our findings suggest a shift among young Chinese parents, who, despite expressing concern for their children's development, tend to prioritize their well-being and leisure when making wellness tourism decisions. This indicates an emerging trend of individualism within the context of Chinese family tourism, reflecting broader cultural changes in contemporary Chinese society. Similar patterns of seeking personal space and independence between generations have also been discussed in Western family tourism research (Albanese and Bocci 2019; Schänzel and Yeoman 2015), although the specific

term “intergenerational solitude” has not been widely used. However, how Chinese parents balance their own needs with those of their children in wellness tourism may reflect both the unique features of this tourism type and changing family values in China.

In contrast to previous studies on family travel, Khoo-Lattimore and Yang (2018) pointed out that families in Asian countries emphasize children's education and learning during their travels. However, in the present study, parents said that this was not the most important issue and that they were more concerned with shaping their children's values than with acquiring knowledge during the trip. This discrepancy may be due to the geographically limited nature of this study, which collected data from mainland China only, or the contextual setting of this study of wellness tourism, in which parents may be more concerned with their children's physical and mental well-being rather than their academic performance.

5.2 | Unexpected Findings and Alternative Explanations

While many parents in our study reported that their primary motivation for wellness tourism was to support their children's development and well-being, our findings suggest a discrepancy between stated motivations and actual decision-making behavior. In practice, parents often prioritized destinations that catered more to their own needs for relaxation and personal growth, with child-friendly facilities considered only as a basic requirement.

One possible explanation for this gap is the influence of social desirability bias, where parents may feel compelled to present themselves as attentive to their children's needs, especially in the context of family research. Alternatively, the increasing pressures of modern life may drive parents to seek opportunities for self-care, even when traveling with children, reflecting a shift toward individualism within Chinese family culture.

Furthermore, the limited popularity of wellness tourism among some families may be attributed to a lack of awareness or understanding of its benefits or to the parents' perception that such experiences are less entertaining for children compared to theme parks or other leisure activities. These findings highlight the complexity of family decision-making and suggest that self-reported motivations may not fully capture the underlying dynamics at play. This discrepancy between stated and actual motivations underscores the importance of adopting a critical perspective when interpreting self-reported data in family tourism research.

5.3 | Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the theory of the niche tourism areas of wellness tourism and family tourism. Based on an examination of their intersection, it pioneers the concept of family wellness tourism. It also refines the theoretical study of the decision-making process in family tourism from the perspective of influencing factors and proposes an explanatory model.

Despite the increase in both family tourism and wellness tourism, there are some gaps in family-centered wellness tourism. In this research, the pursuit of health was explored separately for different generations. This has led to a broader understanding of the contemporary target group for wellness tourism (as opposed to in the past, when the focus was on the health of the elderly and adults). In addition, traditional wellness tourism research has paid less attention to intergenerational relationships, and this research shows that people will seek intergenerational solitude in wellness tourism. In family tourism, the pursuit of health is a newly identified motivation, and the pursuit of intergenerational solitude rather than intergenerational integration is in opposition to the findings of previous family tourism studies.

Previous Western literature on intergenerational tourism has already addressed the dynamics between different generations, emphasizing that such travel experiences can help break down barriers, foster mutual understanding and cooperation, and reduce the distance between generations (Albanese and Bocci 2019; Passafaro et al. 2017). These studies have also noted that differences in needs, preferences, values, and behaviors between generations often lead to varying degrees of conflict during travel. For example, adult children may prefer adventurous and stimulating activities, while their parents might prioritize comfort and relaxation, reflecting a persistent demand for intergenerational independence within family travel contexts (Passafaro et al. 2017). Building on these insights, the present study extends the discussion by situating the analysis within the specific context of wellness tourism in China.

Unlike previous research that has primarily focused on intergenerational integration and conflict, this study delves deeper into how

young parents and their children navigate the pursuit of health and well-being, and how the desire for intergenerational solitude is manifested and negotiated in wellness tourism settings. By examining the social and activity needs of both generations, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of intergenerational solitude, highlighting its significance in the decision-making process and experience design of family wellness tourism. This finding extends the existing understanding of intergenerational dynamics by highlighting the importance of personal space and independent leisure within family travel experiences. This helps expanding the family tourism theory development by offering new perspectives on the balance between collective family experiences and individual autonomy in a rapidly evolving tourism niche.

These findings resonate with yet complicate Self-Determination Theory (SDT). While SDT frames autonomy and relatedness as competing needs (Ryan and Deci 2000), Chinese parents in our study asserted autonomy without sacrificing family harmony—by strategically selecting destinations that accommodated both. This suggests SDT's autonomy-relatedness conflict may be culturally mediated, with collectivist contexts enabling simultaneous need fulfillment through negotiated space allocation.

5.4 | Practical Contribution

This research contributes to the further segmentation and positioning of the Chinese wellness tourism market. It has extensive practical application value due to the significant amount of primary interview data used. It thus provides clear support for destination operators and potential investors. Better understanding consumer demand and further improving the supply side of the family wellness tourism market will also help the overall development of China's wellness tourism market. Based on the findings of this study, destination managers can design their own wellness products targeting families with children.

China's wellness tourism market is in its infancy, and some investors are uncertain about the characteristics and concepts of wellness tourism, not to mention the audience for wellness tourism. This study's findings about family members' understanding of wellness tourism provides stakeholders in the Chinese wellness tourism industry with a clearer and more comprehensive knowledge of the industry, and a better understanding of the segmented target market. In addition, this study further confirms that social media has a significant impact on tourists' travel decisions. This finding is a reminder to destination governments, investors, and managers that social media can be proactively utilized for destination image management.

To meet the demand for family wellness tourism, the authors suggest the following strategies for tour operators. First, develop multigenerational wellness packages such as yoga and meditation for adults and nature exploration or art classes for children. Second, create kid-friendly wellness facilities that offer children's spas, activity centers, and health education workshops, and provide flexible itineraries that balance parent-child activities with personal time. Additionally, given parents' expectations for their children's development, educational elements can be incorporated into wellness activities by organizing cultural

heritage tours or environmental education courses. For example, Fiji's Six Senses Hotel offers a wide range of activities for child guests: yoga, learning local bracelet making, etc. China can learn from the experience of Fiji's Six Senses Hotel and incorporate local features, such as traditional martial arts or Tai Chi for adults, and children's activities in calligraphy, Chinese painting and traditional handicrafts (Six Senses 2025). Finally, destination managers could use social media for precision marketing, analyzing WeChat and Xiaohongshu data to design and promote their products.

6 | Conclusion

This research is characterized by the intersection of multiple research fields. We conducted in-depth interviews with parents and children of Chinese nuclear families to investigate their motivations and their related needs for wellness tourism.

Through a grounded theory approach, data from 31 family interviews revealed the “pursuit of health,” “pursuit of intergenerational solitude,” and “concern for children's growth” as the core elements influencing families' choice of wellness tourism, and indicated that “collectivist culture” and “social media” have a moderating influence on families' decision-making in wellness tourism. The results show that children's growth and voices are valued by parents in family wellness tourism decisions, but parents have greater rights in such tourism activities. This suggests that interpersonal factors in the family play an important role in wellness tourism decisions. Meanwhile, personal factors also influence preferences for wellness activities. A collectivist culture with Chinese characteristics and environmental factors (cultural, social, and geophysical) also has some influence on the decision-making process.

In summary, this study not only fills the theoretical gaps in family wellness tourism, but also provides a practical solution for the Chinese tourism industry—from the design of age-specific activities to the collaborative innovations that practitioners need to make in terms of facilities, services, and cultural integration in order to capitalize on the opportunities of this emerging market.

6.1 | Study Limitations and Future Research

The timing of this research happened to occur at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, when there was an unprecedented rise in health concerns. It is not yet known whether the factors influencing the decision-making of families with children regarding wellness travel will change with the changing economic situation. Moreover, the sample households in this study were predominantly from urban rather than rural areas, which may somewhat limit the generalizability of the findings to a wider range of family wellness tourism. And since it is not possible to exhaust all wellness tourism products, the authors' descriptions of the products are more biased towards functionality. In addition, we focused the research on mainland China and constructed a model of factors influencing family wellness tourism decisions. It is uncertain whether the model is globally representative, due to differences in cultural backgrounds.

Future studies could further include families from different socioeconomic backgrounds and regions to increase the inclusiveness and adaptability of the findings. Additionally, the research mostly focused on the demand side. The supply side could be taken as the starting point of future research to further improve conceptualizations in this field. Finally, regarding the need for intergenerational solitude in tourism, future research could explore whether this feature exists only in family wellness tourism, or whether it emerges because of changes in family relationships.

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Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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