



Cross-national analysis of wellness tourism concepts, tourists' motivations and service preferences

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Introduction

Allow me to invite you on a captivating journey into the realm of wellness tourism. We frequently encounter inspiring slogans from wellness tourism advertisements, such as: "Escape to serenity and discover your inner peace", "Unlock a healthier you", or "Allow yourself to glow". And often, we are lured with the enticing labelling of wellness service packages, such as: "Tranquil relaxation", "Energy gust", or "Melt away your tension". These captivating phrases not only awaken our senses but also ignite our curiosity to explore the irresistible allure of wellness tourism. So, what exactly is wellness tourism, and why do people embark on trips in search of wellness? These are the fundamental questions that have been the driving force behind my research.

The study aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge concerning diverse market perspectives on wellness tourism. This was achieved by enhancing the understanding of the cross-cultural differences in wellness conception, wellness motivations and service preferences. It was also aimed to reveal the differences in the interconnections of these factors across the diverse source markets.

The distinctiveness of each destination suggest that wellness tourism is influenced more by national or regional specificities rather than global trends (Global Wellness Institute, 2018; Health Tourism Worldwide & Wellness Tourism Association, 2021). Finland, Lithuania, and Russia have been chosen as the context of the study based on several factors. These include the historical connections between these destinations, their geographical proximity, and the inclusion of wellness tourism as a strategic priority in their respective documents.

The concepts and approaches connected to wellness are multifaceted and rooted in various disciplines, allowing for exploration from different disciplinary perspectives. In my doctoral research the term "wellness" primarily encompasses services designed to improve emotional, spiritual, social, and physical health, as well as overall wellbeing. The study

examines differences in the concept of wellness and service offerings from the supply-side perspective, as well as motivations and service preferences of tourists from the demand-side perspective. Dann's (1977) Push and pull theory was utilized as the primary theoretical framework.

Wellness tourism is widely recognized as a subset of health tourism (Lee & Kim, 2015; Smith & Puczkó, 2009). Unlike medical tourism, which focuses on treating illnesses through a reactive approach, wellness tourism is primarily geared towards illness prevention and promoting a lifestyle change. It aims to enhance and harmonize various dimensions of health and wellbeing, including physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, social, and psychological aspects, and is predominantly embraced by individuals who are already in good health (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013; Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). The motivation of tourists plays a crucial role in determining whether a service or activity falls under the category of wellness or medical tourism (Lee & Kim, 2015). Nevertheless, the distinction between wellness and medical tourism is becoming less evident as businesses increasingly provide a broader range of services from both domains. This approach is driven by the desire to cater to evolving demands and diverse customer preferences. (Schweder & Hunziker, 2020; Voigt & Laing, 2013).

While often characterized as niche tourism (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001), or a special interest market (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013), wellness tourism is increasingly considered as a mainstream market (Pyke, Hartwell, Blake, & Hemingway, 2016) suggesting its evolving role within the tourism industry and society at large. The raising demand for wellness tourism services is driven by factors such as ageing societies, workplace stress, and higher disposable incomes (Chen, Chang, & Tung, 2014). Tourists are facing challenges such as environmental pollution, inadequacies in healthcare systems that fail to meet their needs, an increasingly fast-paced lifestyle, and unhealthy living habits (Lee, Lam, & Lam, 2020). Additionally, they may also grapple with issues like anxiety, isolation, and identity crises (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Consequently, individuals are actively pursuing simplicity, secular spirituality, and a deceleration of life's pace, while also desiring personalized and meaningful experiences (Voigt & Pforr, 2014).

Wellness and wellbeing has emerged as societal need and socio-cultural trend that significantly impact the consumer decision-making process (Kim & Kim, 2008; Pyke et al., 2016). Tourists are actively seeking wellness services to enhance their overall wellbeing, creating new business opportunities for wellness enterprises and destinations. In earlier studies, wellness tourism was often associated with exclusivity, luxurious services, and hotels (e.g. Konu & Laukkanen, 2010). However, it is increasingly recognized as a necessity, offering a means to harmonize the body, mind, and spirit while fostering self-fulfilment and personal growth (Denizci Guillet & Kucukusta, 2016; Thorne, 2021). Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic may have expedited this transformation, as there has been a heightened awareness regarding the significance of self-care and personal well-being.

Although there has been a notable surge in interest regarding wellness tourism, as evidenced by the proliferation of research in this area, this study has indicated several research gaps which were consistently addressed in three articles of this dissertation. To ob-

tain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under analysis and to gain multiple viewpoints and perspectives, a mixed-methods approach was employed in this multiple case study.

Different market perspectives to wellness tourism concept

First of all, due to the multidimensionality of the concept there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of wellness, wellness tourism, and its components. There is also a significant knowledge gap regarding the variations in the concept of wellness across different markets. These differences in the concept of wellness tourism are evident in the wide spectrum of existing wellness approaches such as Lake Wellness (Konu et al., 2010), Alpine Wellness (Pechlaner & Fischer, 2006), and Forest-based wellbeing (Komppula, Konu, & Vikman, 2017). These approaches encompass distinct service offerings and marketing messages. The absence of a shared understanding regarding the concept of wellness poses challenges to the development of scientific knowledge and inhibits the growth of the industry. The lack of consensus on how to define wellness and wellness tourism, as well as varying approaches to delivering wellness tourism services to customers, can lead to confusion among wellness tourists, unrealistic expectations, and a decline in overall experiences (Grénman & Rääkönen, 2015). Furthermore, the limited understanding of diverse wellness concepts across different countries can make it difficult for country-specific enterprises and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to develop effective communication strategies and provide tailored wellness tourism services that cater to the diverse needs of cross-cultural target groups.

Therefore, considering the first research gap, the first phase of the study took a business perspective aiming to investigate the understanding of wellness and wellness tourism among entrepreneurs from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the study explored factors that could potentially influence variations in the wellness concept at specific destinations. The research was conducted as a multiple case study, with Eastern Finland, Russian Karelia, and Lithuania chosen as the contexts (see Bočkus, Sulkinoja, Kolesnikova, & Komppula, 2021). A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with owners and managers of wellness tourism enterprises in these regions.

The research findings revealed differences in the understanding of wellness across the selected source markets. While spa procedures, saunas, and relaxation were recognized as important elements in all markets, there were distinct differences in the conceptualization of wellness. In Finland, wellness was primarily associated with outdoor activities, nature, landscape, peacefulness, individualism, and privacy. In Lithuania, the industry had a stronger medical orientation, focusing on water-based treatments, curative mud applications, and other nature-based resources for the body, as well as equipment-aided procedures. The Russian wellness concept encompassed elements from both the Finnish and Lithuanian approaches. Furthermore, the study indicated that these differences in the wellness concept influenced the service offerings in wellness tourism. Various factors were found to impact the existing services and guide the development of the wellness tourism sector in each destination. For instance, institutional regulations played a significant role, particularly in

Lithuania and Russia, where wellness service provision was subject to state standards and laws to a greater extent compared to Finland. These regulations influenced customer preferences and choices in these markets.

Cross cultural differences in the motivations of wellness tourists

It is widely recognized that consumers are at the heart of marketing, and businesses can only offer value-based propositions (Grönroos, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). It is widely acknowledged that understanding customer motivation is crucial for effective marketing activities. Motivation plays a pivotal role in decision-making processes, as it stimulates, guides, and sustains goal-oriented behaviors (Fodness, 1994; Gnoth, 1997; Greenberg, 1998). Nevertheless, there is a notable dearth of cross-cultural studies examining the motivations of wellness tourists. Previous research in this field has predominantly focused on specific destinations, lacking a comparative analysis across different nationality groups. The competitive wellness tourism market with growing customer awareness (Dryglas & Różycki, 2017), more destinations positioning themselves as wellness destinations, and increased demand for wellness services (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020; Wen, Kozak, Yang, & Liu, 2020) requires a deeper understanding of wellness tourists' needs and motivations. The spa sector faces additional challenges resulting from the convergence of wellness and medical tourism, as well as the fragmentation within the wellness tourism industry itself. This fragmentation is evident in the diverse range of motivations among customers, which encompass desires for relaxation, socialization, physical health restoration, and personal growth (Koh, Jung-Eun Yoo, & Boger, 2010; Mak, Wong, & Chang, 2009). Given that all these motivations are frequently encountered within the same spa, the significance of accommodating culturally specific needs of customers becomes paramount.

Hence, in the second and third stages of the study, the focus was centred on the consumers from different cultural background (see Bočkus, Tammi, Vento, & Komppula, 2023; Bočkus, Vento, Tammi, Komppula, & Kolesnikova, 2023). To gather data, an online panel service was employed to distribute a self-administered questionnaire, which garnered a total of 1562 responses from wellness tourists in Finland, Lithuania, and the St. Petersburg area of Russia.

First part of this quantitative study unveiled the heterogeneity of wellness tourists illustrating that they are simultaneously driven by multiple motivations in their pursuit of both hedonic and eudaemonic experiences. Through exploratory factor analysis, six underlying motivational factors were identified: rest and relaxation, status, beauty and appearance, personal development, nature and outdoors, and socialization. Among all nationality groups, rest and relaxation emerged as the dominant factor, emphasizing the significance of hedonic experiences. Conversely, status was found to be the least influential motivational factor. This could be attributed to the widespread accessibility of services, the longstanding tradition of spa visits (particularly among Lithuanian and Russian nationality groups), and the evolving perception of luxury (especially in Finland). In the contemporary context, luxury is increasingly associated with self-actualization and the ability to en-

joy privacy in a serene and tranquil environment, rather than being driven by materialistic elements (Iloranta & Kompola, 2022).

Seemingly unrelated regression analysis unveiled significant differences among the nationality groups in terms of motivational factors. For example, beauty and appearance was significantly more important for Russian nationality group, improving physical condition was more important among Lithuanian and Russian nationality groups. Significant disparities were also observed among the nationality groups in terms of the significance they attributed to factors such as nature and outdoors, inclination towards indulging in luxury experiences, and other motivations. These findings indicate that the cultural background of tourists plays a significant role in shaping their motivations.

The connection between wellness tourists' motivations and their service preferences

Third research gap relates to the lack of cross-cultural studies analysing wellness tourism services as a pull factor and the connection between service preferences and tourists' motivations, with businesses often not meeting customers' demands (Chen, Liu, & Chang, 2013) and international customers presenting more challenges due to different needs and motivations.

Hence, the final phase of the study focused on addressing the research gap by examining service preferences, which were considered as a pull factor in this study, and analysing their connection to motivations, which were regarded as a push factor. The study findings indicated that national culture significantly influences tourists' preferences for wellness tourism services. For example, water-based treatments and therapeutic recreation were significantly more important among Lithuanians and Russians than to Finns who seek more for pleasure and indulgence. Secondly, the study revealed significant differences among nationality groups in terms of the strength and direction of associations between service preferences and motivations. This suggests that tourists may be driven by distinct motivations even when selecting the same service.

Theoretical contribution of the study

This study offers several noteworthy theoretical contributions. This study makes a valuable contribution to the field of tourism business and destination marketing research, specifically in the context of wellness tourism. It adds to the body of knowledge on cross-cultural consumer marketing studies in the realm of wellness tourism.

First, it advances the understanding of the wellness concept, both in general and within different destinations. This study argues that the understanding of wellness is shaped by cultural backgrounds and manifests itself in existing wellness business models. Wellness concept materializes in the provision of service offerings and thereby influencing the direction of wellness tourism development. The wellness concept and its understanding are influenced by various characteristics of the domestic wellness market, encompassing regulatory mechanisms, landscape, natural resources, historical circumstances, culture, and traditions. These factors shape the perception and interpretation of wellness by both customers and service providers.

Secondly, this study emphasizes the cross-cultural differences in motivations among wellness tourists. It argues that while there may be some dominant and shared motivations, such as relaxation, among different nationality groups, the motivations of wellness tourists are primarily influenced by regional factors. Therefore, a global motivation-based segmentation approach may not be effective in capturing the diverse motivations of wellness tourists.

Thirdly, it is argued that the local wellness concept in a specific destination and previous experiences of wellness tourism consumption play a crucial role in shaping tourists' expectations for international trips. This is because customers may seek similar service offerings abroad that they are accustomed to in their home country. However, one of the major theoretical contributions of this study is the discovery that even when service preferences are the same among different nationality groups, the underlying motivations driving the selection of specific services may differ. Hence, tourists' motivations are intricately linked to their service preferences, and this connection is influenced by culture. This argument suggests the effectiveness of market segmentation based on nationality, which allows for the anticipation and accommodation of culturally specific needs.

In summary, this study has revealed significant cross-cultural differences in the wellness concept, tourists' motivations, and service preferences, all of which are interconnected in distinct ways within each source market.

Practical relevance for wellness tourism businesses and destination management organizations

This study also has a practical relevance, as it provides a sector specific insight relevant for both wellness tourism enterprises and DMOs. Cross-cultural insights can enhance service offerings and communication strategies for international tourists, thereby promoting the competitiveness and sustainable development of wellness tourism businesses and destinations.

Firstly, the analysis of both the supply and demand sides underscored the significance of unique and destination-specific services. This highlights that tourists are motivated by novelty and the pursuit of new experiences that differ from their everyday home environment. The perceived authenticity, both existential and object-oriented, influences tourists' attitudes and consumption preferences. Consequently, businesses should strive to incorporate authentic elements such as the landscape, natural resources, indigenous wellness traditions and practices, culinary delights, and other tangible and intangible assets and experiences into their service offerings. Effectively communicating the distinctiveness of these offerings is crucial.

Secondly, this study has revealed the heterogeneity of the wellness tourism market, evident in the diverse motivations and service preferences of tourists. By segmenting these heterogeneous groups of wellness tourists into more homogeneous sub-groups based on their shared characteristics, businesses can develop tailor-made offerings. This targeted approach enhances the effectiveness of marketing activities and enables businesses to effectively cater to the specific needs of desired target groups.

Furthermore, despite the increasing significance of eudaemonic experiences, the wellness tourism market continues to be dominated by core services such as massage, saunas, and swimming pools. These preferences are primarily driven by the widespread motivation to seek rest and relaxation in all source markets. Hence, businesses targeting mainstream customer needs should prioritize the development of these services and ensure clear communication to customers about the specific needs they can fulfil.

Lastly, this study demonstrated a statistically significant connection between socio-demographic variables and customers' intention to embark on a wellness trip. It revealed that while there is a growing male market, the women's segment exhibited higher scores across most motivations and service preferences, particularly in the realm of beautification. This emphasizes the importance for businesses to adapt and cater to the needs of this segment, shaping their marketing strategies accordingly. Additionally, study results suggest that as tourists age, their interest in connecting with nature and engaging in outdoor activities increases. This necessitates acknowledging and accommodating these needs within service offerings and promotional efforts. Given that some motivations may be latent or subconscious, marketing campaigns should strive to make people aware of their needs, and the form of service offerings should provide the means or solutions to fulfil them.

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