Wellness Tourism: A Critical Overview

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Tourism and wellness have first been linked outside the English language context.

→ Is ‘wellness’ more than an overutilised marketing term?

In its broadest understanding, wellness can be conceptualised as an alternative, holistic and positive health paradigm that stands in contrast to the biomedical view of health.
## Two opposing paradigms of health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIOMEDICAL PARADIGM</th>
<th>WELLNESS PARADIGM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition of health</strong></td>
<td>Health = absence of disease</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Separation of mind and body</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Definition of disease</strong></td>
<td>Disease = a biological process where pathogens damage the body</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oneness of body/mind/spirit (body as part of an integrated, multidimensional system) interlinked with external system</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship of health and disease</strong></td>
<td>Health and disease are dichotomous opposites</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Health and disease are objective, observable phenomena</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Health and disease are two separate dimensions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Health and disease are subjective and perceptual phenomena</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Focus of health care</strong></td>
<td>BIOMEDICAL PARADIGM (Mainstream model of health)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Short-term focus on curing or alleviating disease symptoms</td>
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<td><strong>Health care characteristics</strong></td>
<td>Standardised care</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intervention focuses on invasive procedures, pharmaceutical drugs and high-tech diagnostics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Consultation is paternalistic</td>
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<td><strong>Role of patient</strong></td>
<td>Patient remains largely passive, authority is inherent in the health professional</td>
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Wellness tourism vs. medical tourism

**Biomedical paradigm of health**
(emphasis on cure)

**Tourists travel because they want to treat/cure a medical condition**

**Mainstream health professionals**
(doctors, nurses) with standardised qualifications

**Services mainly consist of invasive and high-tech diagnostic procedures**

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**Wellness paradigm of health**
(emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention)

**Tourists travel because they want to maintain or improve their health**

**Employees generally not consist of mainstream health professionals; varying degrees of formal qualification**

**Services generally fall outside the biomedical realm**

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**Different Health Paradigm**

**Different underlying tourist motivations**

**Different employee sources**

**Different types of services**
Wellness provider typology

- 3 types of core wellness providers

  **MEDICAL TOURISM PROVIDERS**
  - Private medical tourism clinics
  - Corporate investor-owned hospitals

  **WELLNESS TOURISM PROVIDERS**
  - Beauty spas
  - Lifestyle resorts
  - Spiritual retreats

**HEALTH TOURISM**
Beauty spas

- **Common synergies** with spas and other tourism luxury products: spa & golf, spa & wine, spa & skiing

- Spas **ADDED** to existing resort/hotel properties, increase RevPOR, occupancy and perceived value for room rate (Monteson & Singer 2002)
Lifestyle resorts

- Comprehensive, preferably individualistic, health lifestyle programs designed to achieve health-promoting behaviour changes
- Do NOT have some amenities typically found in tourism resorts
- Incorporate rules
- Are viewed as “gated property”
Spiritual retreats

- One can distinguish ‘silent’ and ‘non-silent’ retreats
- Often, providers are religious or religiously-influenced institutions
- Incorporate strict timetables and rules
- Shared dormitories and/or shared bathrooms are common
- Some places expect their visitors to ‘work’
An overlap between medical and wellness tourism is increasingly noticeable.

**Overlap: ‘Medical wellness’**

- MEDICAL TOURISM PROVIDERS
- WELLNESS TOURISM PROVIDERS

**OVERLAP**

**MEDICAL WELLNESS PROVIDERS (MWP's)**

- ‘Medhotels’
- Medical spas
- Health Clusters
  - Traditional European spas
  - Health care cities
  - Health care malls
- ‘Wellspitals’
- Therapeutic Lifestyle Retreats

*case of traditional European spas* a rigid separation between biomedicine and wellness principles cannot be made, because spa therapy has often been a part of or at least it has been grudgingly accepted by mainstream health professionals. Today, spa towns often attempt to attract medical tourists.
Benefits sought by wellness tourists

Benefits of Wellness Tourism Scale (BWTS)
rating the importance of 46 benefit items
(Voigt, Brown & Howat 2011)

EFA revealed 6 benefit factors

MANOVA and a series of ANOVAS revealed significant differences between wellness tourist groups in 4 out of 6 benefit factors

Transformation of the self as leitmotiv connecting the benefit factors

N = 509
Destination competitiveness

- **Destination competitiveness** is the “the destination’s ability to create and integrate value-added products that sustain its resources while maintaining market position relative to competitors” (Hassan 2000: 239)

- “**Ecosystem services** are the aspects of ecosystems utilized (actively or passively) to produce human well-being” (Fisher, Turner & Kerry 2009)
Wellness tourism resources

- **Resource based approach**: determining a destination’s resources based on which a unique destination profile can be created

<table>
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<th>Created wellness tourism resources</th>
<th>Endowed wellness tourism resources</th>
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<td><strong>Natural resources</strong> (e.g. water, climate, raw materials for natural medicine or cosmetic products, “sacred spaces”)</td>
<td><strong>Cultural, historical and spiritual resources</strong> (e.g. place-specific architecture and heritage; customs and rituals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)</strong> (e.g. modalities and entire alternative medical systems)</td>
<td><strong>Mind and wellness related lifestyle</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wellness-specific superstructure</strong> (e.g. 3 core provider types, spa parks and gardens, meditation paths, barefoot walks)</td>
<td><strong>Human resources and competencies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross-over of wellness with other activities/offerings</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wellness-related events</strong> (e.g. community health events, New Age festivals)</td>
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Little control (you get what you have), but hard to imitate

Can be developed creatively or bought in, but are easy to imitate
Wellness tourism and sustainability

- “[Destination] competitiveness is illusory without sustainability” (Ritchie & Crouch 2003: 5)
- Beyond an individualistic understanding of wellness toward sustainability?
- Different opinions and little research

Demand-side: Conspicuous or conscious consumption?

- Hall and Brown (2006) argue that wellness tourists’ concentration on the self is essentially egoistic and at odds with sustainable ideals
- Wellness tourists are LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) consumers (e.g. Cohen 2008)
Wellness tourism and sustainability

- **Supply-side:** Moral obligation, ignorance or greenwashing?
  
  - Cohen (2008) argues that wellness and sustainability are conceptually related and that spa owners therefore have an obligation to take a leadership role in embracing sustainable practices.
  
  - The “tourism sector does not always have the holistic know-how or the desire” to offer a holistic, sustainable wellness product (Smith & Puczkó 2009: 58).
  
  - Many wellness providers “are focusing exclusively on maximising short-term profits ... [and] appear to ignore the effects of their actions on local communities and the environment” (Lee & King 2006: 194).
Wellness tourism and sustainability

- Industry is largely unregulated → genuine risk of negative impacts
- Many WT providers are located in natural, often sensitive settings
  - Especially the spa sector needs vast energy and water resources
  - Some utilise synthetic, toxic, non-renewable, exotic and imported rather than local materials
- Equity and equality concerns
  - Gated properties in host communities with poor health status
  - Exploitation of traditional Indigenous healing knowledge without sharing the benefits
Wellness tourism and sustainability

- Some evidence of heightened awareness and positive best practice models
  - e.g. Six Senses Resorts & Spas, Element hotels (Starwood)

- In the spa sector industry associations make the case of embracing sustainability as essential part of wellness tourism
  - Sustainable principles as part of codes of ethics
  - Member education in form of conferences and webinars
  - Industry associations/organisations solely focusing on sustainability and the development of accreditation and benchmarking schemes

- At the holistic end, many retreat operators are ‘lifestyle entrepreneurs’, not motivated by profit maximisation (Kelly 2010)
Wellness tourism and wellbeing

- Again, little actual empirical research
- ‘Gimmick treatments’, harmful treatments AND evidence-based wellness tourism services side by side

What measures can be used to assess wellbeing?
- measures addressing physical, social, spiritual and psychological wellbeing or a mix
- objective vs. subjective wellbeing
- negative vs. positive wellbeing
Wellness tourism and wellbeing

Most studies on the effects of *single* wellness services on wellbeing tend to assess negative wellbeing and/or populations with particular illnesses.

To explore relationships between WT and wellbeing, a focus on positive, subjective and psychological aspects of wellbeing is called for!

From a tourism perspective, the effect of single wellness services are less important than the overall effect of the wellness vacation.

- 3-week stay in a health resort showed positive effects on negative (health complaints, fatigue and pain) and positive wellbeing indicators (positive mood, sleep quality) (Strauss-Blasche et al. 2000; 2002; 2004)
Wellness tourism and wellbeing

- **Positive psychology** may be helpful to explore potential relationships between wellness tourism and positive psychological wellbeing.

- Two broad approaches to positive psychological wellbeing:
  - **Hedonic wellbeing** (as indicated by positive affect/pleasure, subjective happiness, satisfaction with life)
  - **Eudaimonic wellbeing** (as indicated by realisation of one’s true potential, a meaningful and fulfilling life)

- Wellness tourism experiences: portrayals of mindless hedonism and meaningful self-actualisation

- Hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing are equally important to achieve a state of **optimal psychological wellbeing** (Keyes 2002; King *et al.* 2006; Ryan and Deci 2001).
Wellness tourism and wellbeing

- Transcendence
- Physical health & Appearance
- Escape & Relaxation
- Re-establish Self-Esteem
- Important Others & Novelty
- Indulgence

Hedonic wellbeing

- Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)

Eudaimonic wellbeing

- Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff & Keyes 1995)
Place/nature as a determinant of wellbeing

Research from other disciplines
- Environmental psychology
- Health geography: therapeutic landscapes (e.g. Gesler 2003; Hoyez 2007)
- Leisure: wilderness experience

Common themes:
- Remote and pristine natural landscapes are perceived to be an antidote to unhealthy urban lifestyles
- Wellbeing is evoked through multi-sensory experience of nature
- Solitude in nature encourages deep self-reflection and contemplation
- Being in nature evokes feelings of wonders and awe and a sense of being connected to something larger than the self
Key messages

- Although there is an overlap, wellness tourism and medical tourism are essentially separate categories of health tourism based on fundamentally different underlying health paradigms.

- There are 3 distinct core providers of wellness tourism (i.e. Beauty spas, lifestyle resorts, spiritual retreats). These also build the core of 1 of 8 categories of wellness-related resources (i.e. superstructure) which in turn are essential for achieving destination competitiveness.

- In wellness tourism aspects of ecosystems (here also referred to as ‘resources’) play a crucial role in that:
  - They have inherent therapeutic value (e.g. air quality, medicinal properties of plants).
  - They directly represent or indirectly augment resources which are utilised to achieve destination competitiveness.
  - They facilitate the satisfaction of benefits sought by wellness tourists (specifically transcendence, escape and relaxation) and may thus even mediate more global levels of wellbeing.
  - They build an important setting for active and passive outdoor recreational services offered by wellness tourism providers.
Key messages

- In tourism, the resource-based approach and sustainability are key ingredients to achieve destination competitiveness.

- Wellness tourism has the potential to negatively impact society and nature, but there is some evidence that tourism suppliers have a heightened awareness of the importance of sustainability and may be more willing to implement sustainability practices than other tourism providers.

- There is some evidence that single wellness tourism services and entire wellness tourism experiences may lead to wellbeing.

- There is a need to include more positive, subjective and psychological aspects in exploring the link between wellness tourism and wellbeing.

- There are substantial research gaps that need to be filled.
Wellness tourism is the sum of all phenomena resulting from a journey by individuals whose motive in whole or in part is to maintain or promote their health and wellbeing, and who stay at least one night at a facility that is specifically designed to holistically enable and enhance people’s physical, psychological, spiritual and/or social well-being, and that ideally also takes into account environmental and community wellness in a sustainable manner.

Thank you!

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Wellness tourism destination competitiveness

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