

Wellness Experiences and Their Impact on Spa Guests' Well-Being in Cameron Highlands

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Abstract

Wellness tourism has emerged as a rapidly growing segment of the global travel industry, yet limited scholarly attention has been given to its influence on guests' emotional and psychological well-being in Malaysia. This study examines how four dimensions of wellness experiences, which are education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism, shape the hedonic well-being of spa visitors in Cameron Highlands. Addressing a gap in the literature on the mental and emotional outcomes of spa experiences, the research employed stratified sampling to survey 370 guests across five spas. Data were analysed using SEM to identify the experiential elements most strongly associated with enhanced joy and satisfaction. The findings provide actionable insights for spa operators and tourism policymakers, highlighting strategies to enrich guest experiences and improve service delivery. By linking wellness experiences to

hedonic well-being, the study contributes to advancing service innovation and supporting the sustainable growth of wellness tourism in Malaysia.

Keywords:

Hedonic well-being, wellness experience, guest satisfaction, tourism experience

1 Introduction

Travel for maintaining or improving personal well-being is referred to as wellness tourism, and it has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global tourism industry. Travelers increasingly seek experiences that combine relaxation, rejuvenation, and health-related benefits (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). Wellness tourism not only offers physical and mental restoration but also promotes hedonic well-being, which encompasses happiness, pleasure, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Wellness experiences may produce differing degrees of satisfaction across various places, influenced by cultural, environmental, and service settings, highlighting the need for customised research (MacIntyre et al., 2024).

The global wellness tourism business is projected to exceed US\$1 trillion in 2024, establishing it as one of the most profitable industries in tourism globally (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). The demand is driven not only by international travelers but also by domestic tourists who prioritise wellness-focused experiences as part of their leisure activities. Malaysia has responded to this demand by positioning itself as a competitive wellness destination in Southeast Asia, offering a range of packages that include luxury spa resorts and traditional therapies based on Malay and Chinese practices (Global Wellness Institute, 2021).

The Malaysian government, through the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), has also recognised the potential of wellness tourism and integrated health-related agendas into tourism strategies. Their efforts include supporting eco-conscious accommodations, wellness-focused packages, and promotional campaigns that align with the broader goals of sustainable development (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). Such efforts not only enhance Malaysia's tourism appeal but also contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage by incorporating traditional healing practices and therapies into modern spa services (Liu et al., 2023).

Furthermore, wellness tourism attracts high-value travelers, who typically spend more on quality experiences compared to conventional tourists. This move provides significant economic benefits to host destinations while simultaneously promoting eco-friendly practices, cultural preservation, and community well-being (Liu et al., 2023). In the case of Cameron Highlands, the unique natural environment that offers cool climate, lush landscapes, and serene settings, offers an ideal atmosphere for spa and wellness experiences that combine nature-based relaxation with holistic health activities. These distinctive attributes reinforce the highlands' reputation as one of Malaysia's most appealing wellness tourism destinations.

The global surge in wellness and healthcare tourism has reshaped the hospitality and tourism industries, especially in regions like Cameron Highlands, naturally suited to wellness retreats. However, despite the rapid growth of wellness tourism in Malaysia, limited research exists on how spa-based wellness experiences influence guests' hedonic well-being, particularly in the Malaysian context. While studies in international contexts highlight the psychological and emotional benefits of wellness tourism, fewer studies have explored this relationship in Southeast Asia, leaving a gap in localised insights.

Moreover, service quality challenges have been reported in Malaysian spas, potentially undermining guest satisfaction. Guests have expressed concerns about rushed treatments, inattentive staff, and inadequate communication. For instance, a reviewer of the Park Royal Collection Kuala Lumpur spa reported dissatisfaction due to feeling rushed during treatment (TripAdvisor, 2024). Similarly, in Bangkok Spa, Johor Bahru, customers expressed frustration over booking mismanagement and changes in room arrangements, creating a negative overall experience (TripAdvisor, 2024). Although these service deficiencies underscore concerns about service quality, the direct correlation to the overarching wellness factors affecting client satisfaction and emotional well-being remains ambiguous. Consequently, the introduction and literature review must more explicitly situate service quality inside the study's framework, facilitating more seamless transitions among the notions of wellness, visitor pleasure, and emotional well-being.

Even with this expansion, much of the current research focuses on service quality and overall customer happiness, with little focus on hedonic well-being outcomes, such as how education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism affect spa visitors' emotional fulfilment. This results in a theoretical deficiency, since a significant portion of the study investigates wellness tourism in a general sense without deconstructing its psychological and emotional aspects. Furthermore, from a methodological standpoint, previous studies mostly focus on Western or international settings, while research in Malaysia and Southeast Asia is notably limited (Liu et al., 2023).

This research aims to fill these gaps by investigating the correlation between wellness tourist experiences and hedonic well-being within the Malaysian spa business. This not only adds to the academic literature, but it also gives policymakers, practitioners, and industry stakeholders who want to improve wellness tourism services while following the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) on promoting well-being for all ages (Martin, 2023). This study addresses this gap with two research objectives:

RO1: To determine how hedonic well-being influences spa guests' wellness tourism experiences.

RO2: To identify which aspects of spa experiences have the greatest impact on guests' hedonic well-being in Cameron Highlands.

The findings will offer actionable insights for spa operators, tourism policymakers, and researchers, supporting improved service quality, enhanced guest satisfaction, and the sustainable growth of wellness tourism.

2 Literature Review

2.1 H1a: The Wellness Tourism Experience in Education Positively Influences the Hedonic Well-Being of Spa Guests

Hedonic well-being highlights the significance of pleasure and enjoyment as essential components of subjective happiness. Entertainment experiences in wellness tourism, such as leisure activities, music, and immersive spa therapies, can foster positive effects by producing enjoyable and memorable moments (Liu et al., 2024). Research indicates that hedonic well-being improves when individuals participate in activities that provide intrinsic pleasure and distract from everyday stressors (Dini & Pencarelli, 2021). Entertainment in spa environments catalyses joy, laughter, and relaxation, essential components of hedonic well-being. Aesthetically curated entertainment experiences enhance emotional satisfaction by integrating enjoyment with rejuvenation (DSouza & Shetty, 2024). Consequently, activities centred on entertainment play a significant role in enhancing hedonic well-being within the context of wellness tourism. Aesthetic quality is a core determinant of the pleasure derived from wellness tourism experiences. The visual appeal of spa facilities, the design of treatment spaces, and the harmonious integration of natural and built environments contribute to an atmosphere of relaxation and joy (Saari et al., 2023). Exposure to aesthetically pleasing settings can facilitate immediate emotional uplift and relaxation, which are central to hedonic well-being (DSouza & Shetty, 2024). Beautiful and tranquil environments allow guests to detach from daily stressors, cultivating deep inner satisfaction and contentment (Smith, 2023). Continued emphasis on aesthetic excellence within wellness settings is considered essential to reinforcing guests' pleasurable experiences and overall happiness.

2.2 H1b: The Wellness Tourism Experience in Entertainment Positively Influences the Hedonic Well-Being of Spa Guests

Hedonic well-being highlights pleasure and enjoyment as essential components of subjective happiness. Entertainment experiences in wellness tourism, including leisure activities, music, and immersive spa therapies, foster positive affect by facilitating enjoyable and memorable moments (Liu et al., 2024). Research indicates that hedonic well-being improves when individuals participate in activities that provide intrinsic pleasure and distract from everyday stressors (Dini & Pencarelli, 2021). Aesthetically curated entertainment experiences enhance emotional satisfaction by integrating enjoyment with rejuvenation (Dsouza & Shetty, 2024). Consequently, activities centred on entertainment play a major role in enhancing hedonic well-being within the context of wellness tourism.

2.3 H1c: The Wellness Tourism Experience in Aesthetics Positively Influences the Hedonic Well-Being of Spa Guests

The aesthetic aspect of wellness tourism directly influences hedonic well-being, focusing on pleasurable emotional experiences. Aesthetic physical environments, cohesive design, and nature-integrated spaces evoke immediate enjoyment and sensory satisfaction, which are fundamental indicators of hedonic well-being (Saari et al., 2023). Studies indicate that aesthetic appreciation elicits relaxation, contentment, and joy, facilitating a detachment from negative emotions (Smith, 2023). Aesthetic environments in spas contribute to visual appeal and improve the overall sensory experience of treatments, thus increasing happiness and satisfaction (DSouza & Shetty, 2024). The aesthetic experience in wellness tourism, by eliciting positive emotional responses, serves as a primary factor in promoting hedonic well-being.

2.4 H1d: The Wellness Tourism Experience in Escapism Positively Influences the Hedonic Well-Being of Spa Guests

Escapism, characterised as the act of disengaging from everyday life and engaging in restorative environments, is closely associated with hedonic well-being as it is closely related to immediate pleasure and stress relief (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Saari et al., 2023). Wellness tourism provides opportunities for escapism through spa rituals, tranquil environments, and multi-sensory treatments that promote joy, relaxation, and a release from daily stresses (Liu et al., 2023). These experiences promote positive emotional states, which serve as critical indicators of hedonic well-being, by enabling guests to engage in self-care and temporary detachment. Escapism significantly contributes to the enhancement of spa guests' hedonic well-being by promoting happiness, tranquilly, and rejuvenation.

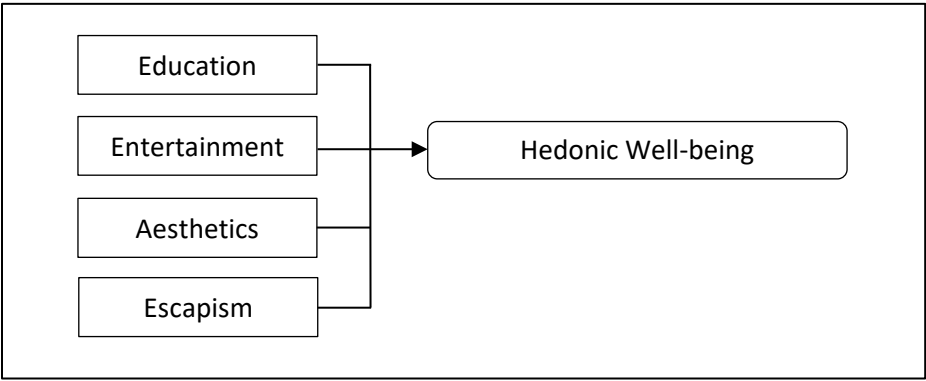


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Adapted From (Liu et al., 2023)

3 Methodology

A quantitative research design was adopted to investigate how four key wellness tourism experience dimensions (education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism) influence the hedonic well-being of spa guests in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among visitors to five selected wellness facilities,

allowing the capture of real-time perceptions immediately after their spa treatments. Guests aged 18 and above were targeted, and stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation from each spa. In total, 370 respondents participated, drawn from Spa Village Cameron Highlands Resort, Spa Garden Cameron Highlands, Bayu Wellness, Satkara Spa The Lake Cameron Highlands, and Solumis Spa Century Pines Resort.

Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire adapted from established wellness tourism and well-being studies. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), measuring the four independent variables, which are education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism, and the dependent variable, hedonic well-being. Data collection took place over three months, with trained enumerators briefing participants on the objectives, obtaining informed consent, and assuring confidentiality and anonymity. The responses were first analysed using SPSS to conduct descriptive statistics, reliability assessments, and preliminary analyses. Following this, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was applied to evaluate the measurement and structural models, enabling rigorous hypothesis testing and assessment of the relationships among the study variables.

4 Findings

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

The 370 spa guests surveyed in Cameron Highlands represented a well-balanced mix of genders, with men making up 51.4% and women 48.6% of the sample. Visitors came from a range of age groups, with the largest proportion aged 18–24 (25.7%), followed by those aged 45–54 (23.0%) and 35–44 (21.1%), showing that the spas appeal to both younger and middle-aged guests. Most participants were working in the private sector (41.1%) or public sector (30.0%), while students accounted for 22.4% and a smaller share (6.5%) were self-employed. In terms of education, the majority were highly educated, with more than three-quarters (76.8%) holding a bachelor’s degree, 13.2% having a master’s degree or higher, and 10.0% completing high school or technical school. Monthly income levels varied, though the largest group earned between RM2,001 and RM3,000 (28.4%), followed by those earning RM3,001–RM4,000 (24.9%) and RM4,001–RM5,000 (22.4%), with smaller proportions earning over RM5,000 (12.4%) or under RM2,000 (11.9%). Most of the spa guests were local tourists (76.2%), while 23.8% were foreign visitors, highlighting that wellness tourism in Cameron Highlands is popular among Malaysians but still draws a notable share of international travellers.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	190	51.4
	Female	180	18.6
Age	18 – 24 years	95	25.7
	25 – 34 years	73	19.7

	35 – 44 years	78	21.1
	45 – 54 years	85	23.0
	55 years and above	39	10.5
Occupation	Public Sector	111	30.0
	Private Sector	152	41.1
	Self Employed	24	6.5
	Student	83	22.4
Education	High School/Technical School	37	10.0
	Bachelor's Degree	284	76.8
	Master's Degree or Higher	49	13.2
Monthly Income	Below RM 2000	44	11.9
	RM 2001 – RM 3000	105	28.4
	RM 3001 – RM 4000	92	24.9
	RM 4001 – RM 5000	83	22.4
	Higher than RM5000	46	12.4
Type of Tourists	Domestic	282	76.2
	Foreigner	88	23.8

4.2 Reliability and Validity

The measurement model was assessed to confirm the reliability and validity of research instruments. As presented in Table 2, all constructs recorded strong Cronbach's alpha values, each above the 0.60 threshold, demonstrating internal consistency. In addition, the composite reliability scores for all constructs exceeded 0.70, indicating a high level of reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) values were also above 0.50 for every construct, confirming that the items effectively measured their intended concepts and met the criteria for convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Education	0.901	0.932	0.775
Entertainment	0.903	0.932	0.774
Aesthetic	0.899	0.929	0.767
Escapist	0.885	0.920	0.743
Hedonic Well-being	0.936	0.950	0.760

4.3 Hypotheses Testing

Figure 2 presents the results of the direct path hypothesis testing, conducted using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval. Following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2017), the significance of each relationship was determined by examining the p-values and t-values. Specifically, a relationship was considered statistically significant if the p-value was less than 0.05 and the t-value exceeded 1.96 for a two-tailed test, indicating strong evidence to support the hypothesised paths.

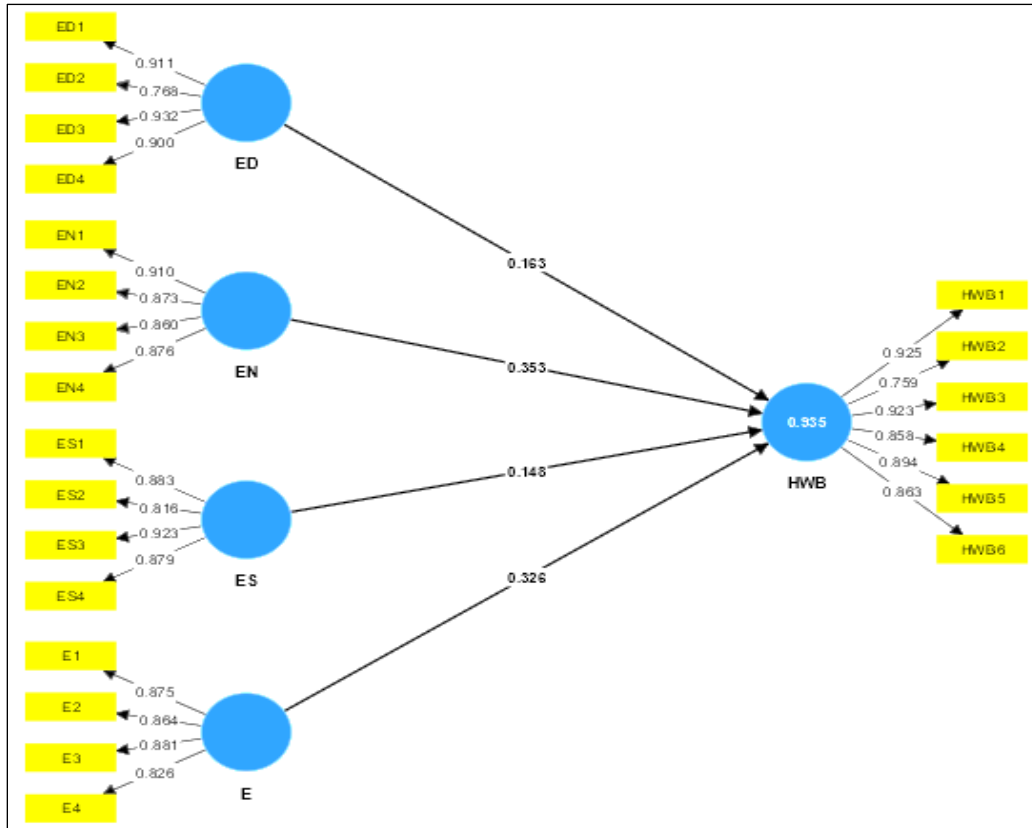


Figure 2: The Structural Equation Modelling Analysis

Table 3: Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	STDEV	t-value	p-value	R ²	Decision
H1a	0.163	0.077	2.104	0.035	0.934	Supported
H1b	0.352	0.084	4.186	0.000		Supported
H1c	0.157	0.115	1.283	0.199		Not Supported
H1d	0.316	0.099	3.302	0.001		Supported

Based on Table 3, the analysis indicated that three out of the four proposed hypotheses were statistically supported. Education demonstrated a positive and significant effect on hedonic well-being ($\beta = 0.163$, $t = 2.104$, $p = 0.035$), suggesting that learning-oriented spa experiences contribute meaningfully to guests' sense of pleasure and satisfaction. Entertainment emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.352$, $t = 4.186$, $p = 0.000$), highlighting its pivotal role in enhancing the overall hedonic experience. In contrast, aesthetics did not show a statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.157$, $t = 1.283$, $p = 0.199$), indicating that visual and design elements alone may not directly influence well-being in this context. Escapism, however, had a substantial positive impact ($\beta = 0.316$, $t = 3.302$, $p = 0.001$), reinforcing the value of immersive and relaxing experiences in promoting guest happiness. Overall, the model achieved an exceptional explanatory power, with an R^2 value of 0.934, meaning that the four wellness tourism experience

dimensions collectively accounted for 93.4% of the variance in hedonic well-being, underscoring the robustness of the findings.

5 Conclusion

This research examined the influence of wellness tourism experiences in terms of education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism to align with the hedonic well-being of spa tourists in Malaysia. The results indicated that wellness experiences strongly affect emotional fulfillment and happiness; however, with different intensities across dimensions. Entertainment appeared as the largest contributor, followed by escapism and education, while aesthetics did not have a major impact.

Critically, these results align with earlier research while also bringing novel views. The significant influence of entertainment corroborates with Dini and Pencarelli (2021) and DSouza and Shetty (2024), who highlighted the efficacy of leisure and pleasurable activities in fostering happiness. The relevance of escapism is consistent with Saari et al. (2023) and Liu et al. (2023), validating the premise that wellness tourism supports psychological repair by facilitating separation from regular routines. Education, however less robust, and this study corroborates Han et al. (2021), who demonstrated that learning opportunities in wellness environments enhance the visitor experience by promoting self-esteem and long-term well-being. However, the non-significance of aesthetics contradicts Smith (2023) and Saari et al. (2023), indicating that in the Malaysian spa environment, aesthetics may be seen as a conventional expectation rather than a distinguishing source of enjoyment. This disparity underlines the need to reassess the contextual function of visual attractiveness in determining hedonic well-being.

Theoretically, this work adds by expanding Pine and Gilmore's (1999) Experience Economy theory. It demonstrates that active, immersive activities (entertainment, escape, education) have a more significant impact on hedonic outcomes than passive appreciation (aesthetics). This complexity enhances wellness tourism literature, especially within Southeast Asia, where empirical data remains scant. Practically, the results underline the need to create spa solutions that stress involvement and immersion, while considering aesthetics as a basic feature rather than a distinguishing characteristic.

In short, the research reveals that wellness tourism in Malaysia, especially via entertainment, escapism, and educational experiences, plays a vital role in boosting hedonic well-being. These findings are crucial for spa operators, legislators, and tourist developers who wish to market Malaysia as a competitive wellness destination aligned with global trends and sustainable development objectives. By critically commenting on both consistencies and inconsistencies with earlier research, this study not only fills a crucial research gap but also suggests practical options for enhancing wellness tourism scholarship and practice.

6 About the authors

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