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Dimensions of holistic wellness as a result of international wellness tourism experiences

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ABSTRACT

Interest in wellness tourism has seen rapid growth in recent years from both researchers and industry representatives. However, it has been noted that research related to understanding the components of a wellness tourism experience is lacking. This research examined International wellness tourism experiences as described by user-generated content published on TripAdvisor.com. Using netnography analysis in conjunction with framework analysis, thematic qualitative coding of travel reviews provided an in-depth meaningful understanding of the wellness tourism experience. In line with Dunn's [(1959). High-level wellness for man and society. *American Journal of Public Health and the Nations Health*, 49(6), 786–792] definition of holistic wellness the results identified four dimensions of the wellness tourism experience, namely body, mind, spirit and environment. Though consumer reviews varied, there was consensus within the data that all four dimensions served as a mechanism towards wellness, in some instances, proving to be barriers. Recommendations for the planning and management of wellness tourism are discussed for each of the dimensions.

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Introduction

Wellness tourism, a niche market within the broader tourism sphere and has recently experienced significant rates of growth, with a projection for continued development (GWI, 2018). In fact, wellness tourism continues to experience growth rates faster than that of global tourism projected to grow to \$808 billion by 2020, accounting for an annual growth rate of 7.5% (GWI, 2018). In response to this growth, health and wellness services are now being offered through a variety of both active and passive activities across hotel and resort brands, wellness retreat centres and specialized travel packages (Stará & Peterson, 2017).

Dr. Halbert Dunn originally introduced the concept of 'holistic wellness' in 1959. At this time, Dr. Dunn presented a new state of health that not only involved the physical, but also consisted of the mind, the spirit and the environment. Dunn (1959) referred to this state as 'high-level wellness'. Adams (2003) argued that wellness consists of three main principles (1) wellness is multi-dimensional (2) wellness is about balance and (3) wellness is relative, subjective and perceptual. As is pertains to the idea of 'wellness tourism', literature revealing linkages between travel, health and wellness date back to 1986 when Lounsbury and Hoopes conducted a pre-test/post-test vacation questionnaire that substantiated significant relationships between vacation satisfaction, relaxation, escapism,

marriage and family, food and lodging and level of educational attainment. Subsequently, numerous studies have corroborated the evidence that vacation experiences do in fact contribute to wellness (Lounsbury & Hoopes, 1986; Neal et al., 2007). More recently, there have also been studies that highlight niche markets of wellness tourism, namely, babymoos (Gabor & Oltean, 2019), and wellness tourism for patients with chronic diseases such as cancer (Wang et al., 2020). However, while studies linking travel to health and wellness are abundant, studies providing a link between wellness tourism and the mechanisms by which holistic wellness is achieved are not as evident. Although it may be assumed that wellness tourism and overall wellness are synonymous, the mechanisms by which a wellness tourism experience provides avenues to support overall wellness are unclear (Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Exploring this gap in the research is important in order to better understand these mechanisms through which the different types of wellness (physical, intellectual, spiritual and environmental) are achieved while travelling. As a result of understanding these mechanisms, wellness tourism providers can better plan for and execute programmes designed to have a more significant impact on tourists holistic health while they are travelling, and even after their trip has ended.

Recognizing this gap in the research, a more in depth look at the experiences of wellness travellers is necessary to aid in the continuous development, planning and management of this rapidly growing market (Chen et al., 2008; Laing et al., 2010; Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Therefore, the focus of this research was to explore the mechanisms that contribute to a successful holistic wellness tourism experience. More specifically, the following research question was set forth:

What are the underlying dimensions of the wellness tourism experience and the mechanisms by which a wellness tourism experience provides support for holistic wellness?

Literature review

Wellness tourism

Prior to beginning a discussion about wellness tourism, we must first discuss the context of overall health, within which wellness sits. According to the World Health Organization (2020), 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. On the other hand, The National Wellness Institute defines wellness as an 'active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward, a more successful existence'. Though these two concepts are not one in the same, they work in tandem with each other along the quest for higher levels of wellness. Essentially, health is considered the goal, while wellness is the pathway to achieving it. Wellness sits within the larger context of overall health.

The concepts *wellness* and *well-being*, though closely related, are also distinctly unique terms. As discussed earlier, the concept of wellness has been described holistically as including dimensions within the realm of the body, mind, spirit and environment (Dunn, 1959). Wellness has been closely associated with prevention of disease and health amongst many scholars and organizations. Well-being, on the other hand, has been more closely associated with the intangible concept of happiness and is both subjective and psychological in nature. In 2017, Longo, Coyne and Joseph developed a scale to measure general well-being which included fourteen constructs: happiness, vitality, calmness, optimism, involvement, self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-worth, competence, development, purpose, significance, congruence, and connection. Despite the fact that there may be some confusion in the literature with regards to these two terms, Hartwell et al. (2016) argue that 'the prevailing view appears to be that tourists seek products, services and experiences to achieve desired states of health and well-being which are conceived of holistically as a balancing of body, mind and spirit' (p. 5). In summary, wellness can be thought of in congruence with prevention and health, while well-being with happiness. Within this study, we will be referring to wellness within the realm of wellness tourism.

Wellness tourism is one of ten key sectors of the larger wellness economy, which comprises of industries that exist to empower people to incorporate wellness behaviours, activities and life habits into their lives (GWI, 2018). Other sectors within the larger wellness economy include spas, beauty and anti-aging, wellness lifestyle real estate, fitness and mind–body, healthy eating, nutrition and weight loss, workplace wellness, thermal/mineral springs, preventative and personalized medicine and public health and complementary and alternative medicine (GWI, 2018). In a general sense, each of these key sectors, including wellness tourism have the aim of encouraging people in ‘the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health’. More specifically, wellness tourism is defined in the literature as:

the sum of all the relationships resulting from a journey by people whose motive, in whole or in part, is to maintain or promote their health and well-being, and who stay at least one night at a facility that is specifically designed to enable and enhance people’s physical, psychological, spiritual and/or social well-being. (Voigt et al., 2011, p. 17)

Furthermore, wellness tourism providers are categorized in this study as businesses and/or facilities whose purpose, in sole, or in part, is to address any facet of wellness within the larger wellness economy. Not to be confused with medical tourism, wellness tourism generally consists of people who are already healthy, and proactively seeking experiences to maintain or improve their overall wellness (GWI, 2018). Conversely, medical tourism is largely reactive, consisting of people who are suffering from illness and motivated to travel by a desire to receive treatment of higher quality at a lower cost (GWI, 2018). Nevertheless, the foregoing discussion implies that wellness tourism is in fact a subset housed under the larger umbrella of health tourism, which also encompasses medical tourism (Chen et al., 2008; GWI, 2018; Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2013; Voigt et al., 2011).

Within the small body of literature on wellness tourism, the majority of studies focused on issues such as motivations to travel for wellness (Chen et al., 2008; Hun Kim & Batra, 2009; Lehto et al., 2006; Mak et al., 2009; Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2013) the characteristics of wellness tourists (Hun Kim & Batra, 2009; Lehto et al., 2006; Voigt et al., 2011) market demand analysis (Gabor & Oltean, 2019; Heung & Kucukusta, 2013; Laing et al., 2010; Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001; Pan et al., 2019; Smith & Kelly, 2006) and the impact of wellness tourists on residential communities (Wang et al., 2020).

In 2006, Lehto et al. delved into the motivational factors leading tourists to travel exclusively for yoga, which is a subset of wellness tourism. Conceptualizing their study on the basis of consumer involvement theory, Lehto et al. (2006) found significant motivations including ‘seeking spirituality’, ‘enhancing mental well-being’, ‘enhancing physical condition’, and ‘controlling negative emotions’. The specificity of these results to yoga tourists led the authors to suggest an expansion of their work to other areas of wellness tourism.

In 2010, Voigt, Howat and Brown extended the literature beyond the surface by exploring specific outcomes of the wellness tourism experience. The authors explored whether wellness tourism experiences should be classified as hedonic, tracing one’s actions back to the pursuit of ‘happiness’ or eudemonic, actions based on deeper meaning (Voigt et al., 2010). Their study revealed that beauty spa visitors exhibited purely hedonic outcomes while spiritual retreat visitors displayed purely eudemonic outcomes, while lifestyle resort visitors were classified as predominantly eudemonic. However, the authors argued that lifestyle resort experiences actually hold more of a middle ground because hedonic outcomes, such as happiness, are simply side effects of eudemonic experiences (Voigt et al., 2010).

Following this study, Voigt et al. (2011) quantitatively and qualitatively explored the benefits amongst these three types of wellness travellers in Australia. The authors developed a ‘benefits of wellness tourism scale’ (BWTS) pointing towards six distinct factors including transcendence, physical health and appearance, escape and relaxation, important others and novelty, re-establishing self-esteem and indulgence. In conclusion, the authors suggested future studies exploring the benefits of wellness tourism in other cultural contexts. Medina-Muñoz and Medina-Muñoz (2013) conducted

a three-part exploratory study of wellness tourists focused on identifying their socio-demographic characteristics, motivations and the demand for wellness tourism on the island of Gran Canaria, Spain. Most notable to their study were the significant differences amongst tourists with various socio-demographic characteristics in regards to the types of wellness centres and treatments they were patronizing. Additionally, the authors found a significant connection between wellness behaviours at home and wellness behaviour exhibited on vacation. More recently, Gabor and Oltean (2019) explored babymoon tourism in Romania and found that this type of tourism has the potential to positively impact emotional well-being and grow destination brand identification and intention to revisit. Wang et al. (2020) used the concept of spatial stigma to take a unique look at how wellness tourists living with chronic diseases impacted local community residents in Bama Yao Autonomous County in China. Surprisingly, they uncovered negative effects, leading residents to spatially separate themselves from spaces traditionally occupied by these types of wellness tourists.

Based on the current state of the literature, coupled with the fact that the wellness tourism market has seen rapid growth in recent years, it seems fair to suggest that a gap exists linking the descriptive dimensions of the wellness tourism experience and the mechanisms by which holistic wellness is achieved for wellness tourists. Thus far, only one study has focused on the nuances that exist within a wellness tourism experience (Voigt et al., 2010). Underserved within the literature is research that links the wellness tourism experience to holistic wellness, as explored through the mechanisms by which holistic wellness is achieved. Therefore, in order to decipher the mechanisms by which travel and overall wellness coincide, this study answers the research question 'What are the underlying dimensions of the wellness tourism experience and the mechanisms by which a wellness tourism experience provides support for holistic wellness?' Understanding these mechanisms aids in providing a more in-depth look into 'how' wellness tourism organizations can help travellers achieve holistic wellness through the interconnected realms of body, mind, spirit and environment. This exploration fills a gap in the research as opposed to the current understanding of 'what' wellness tourism is, the current state of the market and descriptors of the different types of wellness tourism.

Online reviews and tourism

The tourism industry has long since been acknowledged as a domain filled with information and communication dependent on technology for the day-to-day management of an operation (Poon, 1993; Sheldon, 1997). However, only recently has a new term been characterized to encompass the second stage of development of the World Wide Web: Web 2.0. With the consumer as the focal point for information creation, a major part of Web 2.0 has been the distribution of opinions online, commonly referred to as user-generated content (UGC). It has been argued that UGC has the power to generate communities in the virtual world whose influence extends far beyond those who produce and interact online, creating a new type of reality influencing consumers around the globe (Litvin et al., 2008).

This phenomenon of UGC has caught on for whole host of reasons, ultimately rooted in one of the unique characteristics of the hospitality and tourism industry, intangibility. Further to this, UGC has created space to be utilized as an accessible trip planning and post-trip evaluation tool. Travel related UGC has been considerably studied in relation to destination image (Choi et al., 2007; Jani & Hwang, 2011; Lim et al., 2012; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013), post-consumption behaviour (Bosangit et al., 2012; Ye et al., 2011), wildlife tourism (Cong et al., 2014), organizational reputation (Baka, 2016).

Although UGC has been widely used amongst tourism scholars, it is not without its limitations. Such limitations include criticisms for 'fake reviews', lack of representativeness of demographic characteristics and the lack of consistency between reviews (Ayeh et al., 2013). However, the majority of consumers perceive online reviews to be objective, truthful and useful and are more inclined to trust peer reviews rather than company marketing materials (Park et al., 2007). In fact, Baka (2016) argued that UGC has evolved from a 'novel interloper' to a 'routine and habitualized practice in the travel sector' (p. 148). Further to this, Cong et al. (2014) posited that online reviews do in fact provide sources for rich and in depth information, without the influence of a researcher.

In order to address these drawbacks while still gaining access to rich description, UGC was considered an appropriate method of data collection for this study. TripAdvisor, the largest and most globally recognized social travel networking website was used for this study. TripAdvisor boasts 350 million unique monthly visitors and more than 290 million reviews covering 5.3 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions across 47 countries around the world (TripAdvisor, 2015). Although research on UGC in travel is extensive, there remains much room for growth in this area as it relates to the complex and multi-dimensional nature of wellness tourism experiences.

Methodology

Netnography

Netnography is defined as 'a qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Although continuous advances in technology and the internet have created pathways for more researchers to study data gathered online, netnography has faced its share of ethical debates. Netnographic research has been categorized into two forms; research that includes passive observation of textual discourses (Kozinets, 2002) and research that includes the researcher as an active participant in the production of data (Kozinets, 2015). The main predicament for passive observation using the netnographic approach lies in the fact that as a researcher, you do not know who the participants are, in addition to the fact that the participants do not know their words are being studied. In the case of actively participating in a private group discussion, Kozinets (2015) argued that researchers must seek approved access to this group and make their role as a researcher known. However, Roy et al. (2015) suggested that in order to conduct research in public forums or groups (e.g. TripAdvisor), where anyone is free to join and post, researchers do not need to apply these same rules. In the case of TripAdvisor, another ethical concern for the netnography methodology is that participants may be sharing pseudo names, ages and other identifying information, leading the researchers to false information (Roy et al., 2015). However, due to the unobtrusive nature of this study, in addition to the fact that TripAdvisor acts as a public domain, secondary data was gathered and analysed with any identifying information kept confidential, negating much of the ethical concern for false identifying information. Tourism researchers have recently begun to adapt the netnography methodology (Baka, 2016; Janta et al., 2011; Mkono et al., 2013; Rageh et al., 2013; Woodside et al., 2007) and argue for further use of this method in other tourism studies (Mkono, 2012; Mkono & Markwell, 2014).

Data collection

Prior to beginning data collection, the population of wellness tourism providers was selected beginning with an online Google search of website lists using the key phrase 'Top Wellness Retreats in the World'. The search resulted in fourteen lists, all published by third party websites such as Conde Nast Traveller, and uncovered one hundred unique wellness tourism providers. Each company was reviewed for its relevance and fit with the definition of wellness tourism as reviewed in the literature. Once collected, the full list of one hundred companies was categorized based on their continent and sub-region as listed by the United Nations (2014). This categorization was done in order to accommodate the stratified random sampling technique used to choose a representative sample from the geographic regions of the companies. The sample for this study ($n = 20$) was collected using a stratified random sampling method within the list of 100 companies based on geographical location. Once the list of companies was randomly chosen, all reviews for each company were downloaded by the researcher into a Microsoft Excel Format. In order to be included for analysis, the review had to be written in English and have been published between the months of December 2014 and November 2015. These criteria were deemed appropriate due to the familiarity of the primary researcher with

the English language, in addition to selecting reviews that covered a one-year time span. Companies included for analysis included offerings representing 8 out of the 10 wellness economy sectors including the spa industry (100%), beauty and anti-aging (70%), fitness and mind–body (85%), healthy eating, nutrition and weight loss (85%), thermal/mineral springs (10%), preventative and personalized medicine and public health (25%) and complementary and alternative medicine (40%). The two sectors not represented were workplace wellness and wellness lifestyle real estate. The data collected across the 20 companies selected through stratified random sampling, comprised 1216 reviews totalling 222,815 words. Typically, there were between 60 and 70 reviews per company.

Framework analysis

Analysis and interpretation for this study followed the steps for framework analysis as recommended by Ritchie et al. (1994). Framework analysis utilizes a well-defined process where gathered data are sifted, charted and sorted in line with key issues and emergent themes discovered through the data. Preliminary reading of the reviews identified that data saturation had been reached. Data saturation was determined based on repetition of keywords and phrases as well as preliminary identification of codes and themes within the review contents. Past research has shown that when data reach saturation, no new content or codes are likely to be produced (Chen, 2007).

Familiarization included reading through the reviews within each star category while taking notes on key themes and substantive issues. The text were content analysed using NVivo 11, a text mining software that supports the analysis of qualitative data. To begin identifying a preliminary thematic framework, a list of the top 100 most frequent keywords for each star category was obtained. In combination with the notes from familiarization, keywords and phrases were used to identify a preliminary emergent thematic framework. The trustworthiness of coding qualitative data has long been a concern for qualitative researchers (Woodward & Franzen, 1948). Trustworthiness refers to the rigor of analysis taken in qualitative research to ensure that the interpretation of the data is credible (Nowell et al., 2017). In order to address trustworthiness, the raw data were first coded by the primary researcher and then brought to the other authors to identify and discuss any differences or disagreements to ensure inter-coder reliability standards. This process of data analysis allowed for a number of iterations between authors to occur and included the development of a coding framework, continuous coding comparisons and detailed documentation of the analysis process (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, during the production of the final results, comparisons between the raw data and the final analysis were made individually by each author.

Based on the surrounding text of the keyword or phrase, the preliminary emergent thematic framework was applied to the raw data in order to begin the process of extracting meaning. Some pieces of text were indexed under multiple themes highlighting patterns of association within the data. For example, the quote 'This wellness farm is the place to escape from the noise and tension of the city.' was assigned an index under both interpretive codes 'rejuvenate' and 'escape'. Segments of coded data were considered trustworthy if researchers agreed on the same grouping of codes. A discussion of the coding disagreements revealed that some of the initial interpretive codes were redundant. Subsequently, each interpretive code was reviewed for its distinctiveness. At this time, it was noted that some codes sharing similar meaning needed to be re-coded to become one interpretive code. For example, interpretive codes 'escape' and 'rejuvenation' were originally two separate codes that were merged together to become one code 'revitalization'.

After the process of indexing was complete, sample quotes were lifted from their original context in the data and charted according to their interpretive code. Each interpretive code was given an operationalized definition to ensure consistency amongst the quotes being lifted from the data. At this point, interpretive codes were explored for homogeneity in order to assign an overarching theme related to holistic wellness. At the end of this process, the coding spectrum included 4 themes, 14 interpretive codes and 2174 free codes representing 5 different star categories of data (Table 1).

Table 1. The coding spectrum.

Interpretive code	Operational definition of interpretive code	Star Rating					Total	Total percent %
		5	4	3	2	1		
The Body: Experiences that contribute to the physical structure or makeup of a person.								33.2
Culinary	Reviews that address food quality and/or food service.	332	49	26	10	8	425	19.5
Activities	Reviews that address activities that require physical participation of the guests (e.g. yoga, hiking etc.)	106	17	13	3	5	144	6.6
Wellness Services	Reviews addressing those services that guests participate in passively (e.g. spa treatments).	108	14	9	5		136	6.3
Detox	Reviews addressing experiences where the body was rid of unhealthy toxins or substances.	5	12				17	0.8
The Mind: Experiences that contribute to the element of a person that enables them to be aware and conscious of thought.								17.9
Growth	Reviews addressing the feeling of progress and/or change with regards to wellness as defined by Dunn (1959).	187	28				215	9.9
Revitalization	Reviews addressing experiences that provided the ability to escape restore and refresh.	94	62	19			175	8.0
The Spirit: Experiences that are non-physical in nature and relate to one's emotions.								11.5
Spiritual Healing	Reviews addressing any experiences in relation to or affecting of the human spirit or soul.	45	29				74	3.4
Community	Reviews addressing shared experiences among guests and/or staff.	79	28	12			119	5.5
Immersion	Reviews addressing experiences relating to high levels of engagement or interest in an activity or setting.	26	31				57	2.6
The Environment: Experiences related to the surroundings in which the tourists are operating, including surrounding human activity.								37.4
Staff	Reviews that address staff service before, during or after a visit.	216	82	45	23	19	385	17.7
Grounds	Reviews addressing the location, public grounds and atmosphere of the wellness resort.	76	47	20	2	4	149	6.9
Price	Reviews addressing the price of the wellness resort.	26	55	28	16	7	132	6.1
Rooms	Reviews addressing the physical makeup and/or atmosphere of the rooms at the wellness resort.	64	31	11	4	4	114	5.2
Crowding	Reviews addressing an experience described as having too many people.		26	3	3		32	1.5
Total Interpretive Codes							2174	100

Once all charts were complete, the final step, mapping & interpretation took place. First, a search for the most meaningful and representative sample quotes was conducted for each interpretive code. In addition to this, a search for disconfirming evidence within each interpretive code was also conducted. Searching for both confirmation and disconfirmation within each theme resulted in the organization of a synoptic chart that aided in the derivation of latent interpretive meaning (Figure 1).

Findings and discussion

Demographics

Wellness tourism companies represented four continents and sixteen countries (Table 2). Reviewers travelled in a variety of different groups including couples (46%), with family (17%), friends (16%) and for business (3%). Approximately 18% of all reviewers travelled solo. The most popular time to travel for wellness was summer (29%) and spring (28%). Reviews originated from a multitude of geographic regions including The USA (48%), England (10%), Australia (9%), New Zealand (6%) and Canada (4%) (Table 3).

Dimensions of the wellness tourism experience

In alignment with Dunn's (1959) holistic concept of wellness, the analysis identified four dimensions of wellness, namely, body, mind, spirit and environment under which interpretive codes from this

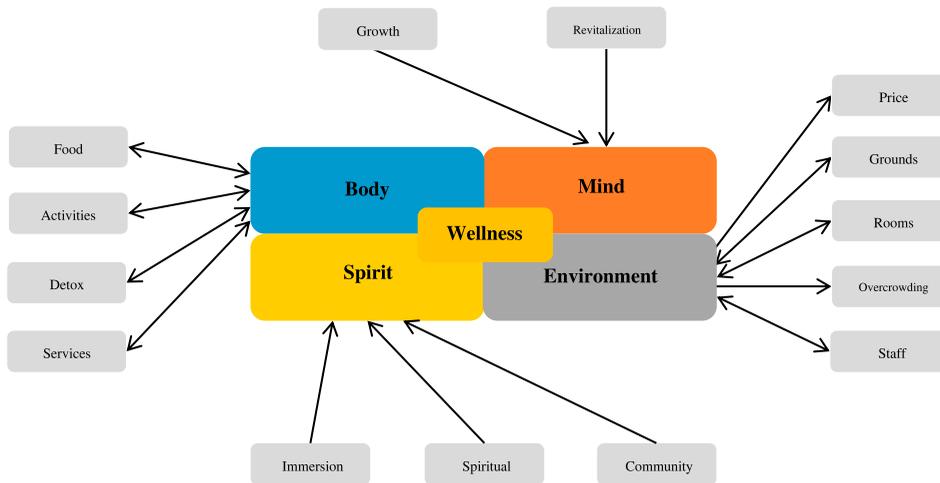


Figure 1. Dimensions of the wellness tourism experience. * Pathways towards wellness are represented by an arrow (→) pointing from the interpretive code towards a theme. * Barriers towards wellness is represented by an arrow (←) pointing from the theme towards an interpretive code. * Interpretive codes representing both pathways & barriers are represented by a double arrow (↔).

study were clustered (Figure 1). Additionally, codes were specifically categorized to identify how they acted as a mechanism to support holistic wellness. Preliminary results from this study support the holistic dimensions discussed below (Dillette et al., 2016).

The body

A major theme emergent amongst wellness traveller reviews was the dimension of the physical body as it relates to wellness. Reviewers referenced experiences that contributed to this dimension including food, activities, services and detoxing (Table 1). Representing the highest number of interpretive codes, gastronomic experiences were an important topic of discussion for wellness travellers.

Table 2. Wellness tourism company locations.

Company Location (n = 20)	Frequency	Percentage
North America (n = 11)		
Mexico	1	5
Nicaragua	1	5
Dominica	1	5
Turks & Caicos	1	5
Costa Rica	1	5
United States of America	5	25
The Bahamas	1	5
Asia (n = 6)		
The Philippines	1	5
Thailand	1	5
Oman	1	5
Turkey	1	5
Bali	1	5
India	1	5
Europe (n = 2)		
Germany	1	5
Spain	1	5
Australia (n = 1)		
New Zealand	1	5
Total	20	100

Source: Table based on data collected from TripAdvisor.com downloaded by the research team.

Table 3. Demographics of TripAdvisor reviews.

Travel group	Frequency	Percent (%)
Couple	420	45.8
Solo	170	18.5
Family	155	16.9
Friends	149	16.2
Business	24	2.6
Total	918	100
Season (n = 1210)	Frequency	Percent
Summer (June-Aug)	356	29.4
Spring (March-May)	344	28.4
Fall (Sept-Nov)	273	22.6
Winter (Dec-Feb)	237	19.6
Total	1210	100.0
Origin of Review	Frequency	Percent (%)
United States of America	470	47.7
England	96	9.7
Australia	92	9.3
New Zealand	63	6.4
Canada	41	4.2
India	28	2.8
Singapore	20	2.0
Dubai	16	1.6
China	14	1.4
Philippines	13	1.3
Others	132	13.4
Total	985	100.0

Source: Table based on data collected from TripAdvisor.com downloaded by the research team. Dillette et al. (2016). An exploratory examination of the wellness tourist experience using netnography.

Findings illustrated that the majority of wellness tourists placed value on food that is fresh, local, nutrient-rich, energizing and well prepared. Additionally, findings from numerous wellness tourism providers also reflected on the food leading to a tangible change in their overall health, adopting a new diet after their wellness tourism experience concluded:

One of the things that truly surprised me was the food. The menu is all vegan which made me nervous at first. But, after just 7 days eating here, I can feel a tangible difference in my body. More energy, clearer skin, I even lost weight without trying. The meals were absolutely delicious and you won't even feel like you're missing meat. It had such an impact on me that I am now eating a mostly vegan diet back at home. (5 star)

Moving beyond these more obvious traits, wellness tourists also expressed the value they placed on consuming food that supported the local community:

The food was incredible. Not only that ... the resort set up activities where we went out into the community to see where our food was coming from, chatted with the farmers and gathered the ingredients for our meal. They also offered a preparation class so we could truly see the process of the food from farm to table. I truly enjoyed this aspect, especially getting to see how much the resort was supporting the local community. (4 star)

Divergent from previous literature, this study adds to the wellness tourism literature through uncovering the unique importance of culinary experiences as a mechanism to support holistic wellness for wellness tourists. In contrast to a regular vacation experience, it is clear that the food provided at a wellness resort is judged based not only on taste and quality, but also nutritional value, calorie content and its ability to provide energy and freshness. Some wellness tourists even reported their culinary experiences having a lasting impact on their overall dietary decisions. For example, some reviewers described their experiences learning about different types of food preparations, and the benefits of eating locally sourced food while on their wellness retreat as a catalyst for taking this information back into their daily lives as a practice. Others describe actually having made major changes to their diet, such as eating vegan as a direct result of their wellness tourism experience. Further to this, wellness tourists also expressed an appreciation for understanding where their food was grown,

harvested and the impact it had on the local community. With this in mind, it is important that the culinary experiences provided by wellness tourism companies be holistic, moving beyond just 'healthy food that tastes good'.

Another unique aspect of the culinary experiences provided by wellness tourism companies was the various detox and dietary programmes. In many cases, reviewers reflected on these experiences as accomplishments and 'cathartic' opportunities for growth:

During the detox a whole host of problems that hadn't reared their heads in years came back to the fore – I was told that this was normal during the process, and it felt about right. It was unpleasant, sure, but I had the prevailing feeling that it was cathartic. (5 star)

This review, along with others analysed in the data, reveals that the physical portions of a wellness tourism experience are not only linear, but also interconnected to other parts of the holistic wellness experience. Although the majority of the analysis revealed that culinary experiences served as a mechanism to support wellness, in some instances, these experiences were regarded as a barrier, producing negative emotions. Wellness travellers illustrated that, while the freshness of the food was valued, the lack of variety, smaller portions and dietary restrictions imposed were not appreciated:

We regrettably were only at Santaritas¹ for 2 nights, where I was pretty much chained to bed from all the nasty toxins being released from my body that I didn't have the chance to explore or partake in any of the activities that the farm offered. (4 star)

Understanding detoxing as both a support mechanism and a barrier to holistic wellness, wellness tourism providers should take special care to understand that the process of detoxing is sensitive, and must be handled and explored with extra care, as the impacts may be more far reaching than anticipated for wellness travellers.

All of the wellness centres included in this study offered some type of physical activity geared towards wellness for their guests. Reviews commented favourably on the knowledgeable staff, the diversity of activities and the skill set of teachers. More specifically, many reviewers provided strong evidence to suggest that the teaching styles, class settings and spiritual nature of yoga offerings were extremely important to their wellness:

The yoga was also one of the highlights. The yoga deck is paradise for anyone who practices. It is open and the view is amazing. The teacher Amanda was fantastic. She worked towards the skill set of the group and mixed between beginners and advanced. She was very keen in sharing her passion for yoga, Vinyasa yoga in particular. (4 star)

In addition to positive reviews, findings illustrated that while activities were sometimes physically invigorating, not all teachers maintained the same skill level, and some visitors felt overwhelmed by the amount of activities offered, leaving no time for relaxation:

I found Luca Point was not the best choice for a 'rest & relaxation' vacation. There are SO MANY choices of how to spend your time. We found that we felt guilty for wanting to sleep in or lay by the pool, because we would miss something like an early morning hike or an exercise class. For us, it was too overwhelming. (3 star)

Services that had an impact on physical wellness referred to any passive wellness treatments experienced by the guest, for example, massages, hot baths and facials. Wellness traveller reviews reflected on the competencies of the staff in addition to the feeling of being physically renewed after a treatment:

I opted for the 7 day relax and renew package which was perfect for me. If you are looking for a very laid back program, then this is the one for you – different types of massages evenly spaced out, such as essential oil, Thai massage, hand and leg massage etc. I left each session feeling like I was floating on air. The therapists are highly knowledgeable and very experienced. (5 star)

While the majority of guests had positive experiences with the services offered, there were some complaints that revealed services rendered as barriers to wellness:

The Spa ... we were machines, in and out. The masseuse made zero effort to connect on a personal level. It was all about – rub left leg 5 times, proceed to rub right leg 5 times. (2 star)

The findings from this study supported previous findings and illustrated that experiences related to the physical body were important (Lehto et al., 2006; Voigt et al., 2010; Voigt et al., 2011). Most prominently, culinary experiences proved to play a vital role in determining holistic physical wellness for travellers. Not only is it about 'good food', as is the case in most regular hospitality and tourism operations, but rather, it is about the process of learning why food is such an essential part of our daily lives and the nourishment it provides for, or detracts from our bodies.

The mind

Mindfulness is central to the concept of holistic wellness (Dunn, 1959). In this study, mindfulness is described as experiences related to the element of a person that enables them to be aware and conscious of thought. Emergent from the wellness traveller reviews, mindfulness was characterized by the concepts of rejuvenation, escape and growth. Similar to findings from Voigt et al. (2011), many wellness tourists travel with the expectation of experiencing deep rejuvenation and relaxation. As evidenced by the following review, findings consistently demonstrated rejuvenation as both a motivation and a benefit of wellness travel:

I went by myself for a week to relax, recharge and exercise. I had one of my best weeks ever. The staff and the environment helped me to regain my energy, inspiration and smile. I can't thank you enough for great place for solo visitors looking to revitalize and have a life changing experience. (5 star)

Additionally, it was evident that profound experiences of personal growth were an outcome for some wellness travellers. Growth is a difficult concept to measure and identify as a tangible experience. However, the notion of transformation, progress, illumination of the mind and life-changing experiences were present in many of the reviews. Many who wrote about this theme reflected that they had not expected to have such a life-changing experience leading to new beginnings and perspectives. The following comment reflects on the fact that wellness travel does have the capacity to have a long-term impact on mental health:

There should be a moratorium on reviewing Asharanda until way after the fact, because its benefits aren't always felt immediately. I didn't expect it to have such a profound impact on me but it really was a little slice of paradise, with a very calm and enriching energy. It is the perfect place to come and contemplate your life, to make some changes to your mind and body, to re-charge your batteries, to detox, or simply lie by the pool. I have come away with so much more awareness of life, my mind and health and have the tools to carry what I learnt with me. Thank you to all the wonderful staff for making it such a beautiful, life changing experience not just a lovely holiday. (5 star)

Similar to Filep's (2009) findings about study abroad travellers and their search for self-development, this idea of personal growth as an outcome of wellness tourism adds a new dimension to the wellness tourism experience and literature. While it cannot necessarily be promised that each visitor will have such a transformational experience, focusing on providing a long-term commitment to travellers could be a step towards differentiation in the wellness travel market.

The spirit

Spiritual wellness is conceptualized as non-physical and the birthplace of one's emotions. Wellness travellers illustrated this theme as important through rich description of immersion, community and spiritual connection. Immersion was particularly apparent in reviews referring to becoming engrossed in the sounds of nature, the culture of a community or a spiritual practice. As evidenced by the following review, it is obvious that wellness travellers often times felt a deep sense of transformation as a result of immersion into an experience:

It was my first yoga retreat, so I immersed myself in the yoga/satsang/workshop/ashram aspect of the place. An ashram can be a magical place by committing to that aspect I had many moving experiences and one jaw dropping, maybe life-transforming one. (5 star)

In addition to the experience of immersion, the concept of spiritual connection was referred to with regards to meditation, astrology readings and spiritual development. Reviewers reflected on meditation settings as providing a relationship to the spirit and bringing them closer to a higher power:

Waking up before the sun and sitting for 25 minutes of silent meditation are definitely challenging, but I am growing and learning and discovering more about myself and others and our relationship to God. (5 star)

This important, yet very intangible experience, played a vital role for many wellness travellers. Inter-connected to both the mindful and environmental dimensions of holistic wellness, providing the space and appropriate setting for spiritual enlightenment is extremely important for wellness tourism providers.

Lastly, several reviews addressed having shared experiences with other guests, friends, family and staff. Particularly apparent in these reviews was the fact that travellers truly valued the community aspect provided at many wellness resorts. These results confirm this type of social interaction as an integral part of the wellness tourism experience. For example, one review describes their connection with the wellness resort and the guests they met as follows:

The nature of my journey is somewhat personal, I was looking for answers to questions that I never believed would be answered here, but let's just say, I met some amazing people who changed my view on life, people who were just so beautiful, it's a rare thing in this world. Many people I met stated that Asharanda has this amazing energy, so many people experience it, but just cannot put their finger on it, but whatever it is, it's unbelievable. I will literally look back on this last 7 days as a life changing event for me, thank you Asharanda and to all the amazing guests that stay there, you are truly changing lives. Lastly, to that special person whom I met on the boat trip, you are a gift. (5 star)

Although the idea of 'important others and novelty' was introduced in 2011 by Voigt et al. this concept of community in the form of connecting with strangers while traveling is a new discovery on the wellness tourism front. Unlike more traditional forms of travel, wellness tourism attracts the likes of the solo traveller quite often. With this in mind, many wellness travellers are looking for an inwardly focused experience, but also made note of how important it was to have the opportunity for combining energy and experiences with others. Some wellness companies included in this study already provided the landscape for this, including community dining and group meditation opportunities. For those companies that are not yet capitalizing on this community aspect, it is imperative to take note of its importance for future planning and management of wellness tourism experiences.

The environment

The environment refers to the physical space that wellness tourists inhabit. Based on the amount and type of reviewer comments related to the environment, it was evident that the environmental dimension was the most important aspect with regards to laying the right foundation conducive to holistic wellness (Dunn, 1959) for this group of wellness travellers. For example, the level of service provided by staff was a significant theme amongst reviews. While the majority of reviews about staff were positive in nature, there was also a meaningful representation of negative reviews. From a favourable perspective, staff were described as delightful, exceptional, impeccable, and attentive in addition to going to great lengths to create lasting memories and relationships with guests that transcended the time period of their stay:

The staff is warm and always eager to help, support or train. And they support you after you leave with the information packed website and on going email or phone support. I will definitely return for more encouragement and reminders about how to live a healthy life. (5 star)

The staff really do look after you and genuinely care about your wellbeing and developing a personal program for you. It goes beyond the niceties of general hospitality, these people truly do make a difference in your life. They even give you tips and tricks to continue using once you leave and they continue to check in on you even after you've completed your program! For the first time in my life, I feel like I can actually make lasting change for my health. (5 star)

On the contrary, negative reviews regarding staff revealed inconsistency in service, reactive service, lack of employee training and low quality management:

The service was entirely reactive instead of proactive. You have a choice between the Balinese employees that were cheerful and helpful, yet would screw things up due to language barrier, or the local indigenous employees that looked like they wanted to stab you when asking them for something. (1 star)

Other environmental dimensions that affected guests during their stay included the grounds, rooms, pricing and crowding. Most important to note is that the 'space' in which wellness tourism resorts are located is the foundation for providing a positive and holistic wellness experience. For example, there were many reviews addressing property surroundings including the location of the wellness resort, public space (e.g. pools, gardens, workout space) as well as the intangible atmosphere that was felt due to the nature of the grounds:

The resort is a really special and nurturing resort, designed to sit in cohesion with the natural landscape, set in the midst of a lush, green rainforest, they are one. The hotel grounds within the rainforest are carefully maintained by a group of gardeners who are always pruning, trimming, cutting etc. The view of the valley and surrounding hills is just lovely. It is the perfect place to relax and reflect. (4 star)

Similarly, the private room space provided must maintain the same atmosphere. When spoken about negatively, both the rooms and the grounds of the property negatively affected ones wellness experience. Another important aspect of creating the optimal wellness experience for a guest is taking into consideration the amount of people on the property. Some reviewers noted that overcrowding of the resort led to a less than satisfactory experience and detracted from their motivation to visit for rest and relaxation. Lastly, price was a barrier for many guests. Amongst all reviewers, price was mentioned as a barrier to enjoying the wellness travel experience. Reviewers argued that the price point was very high and did not match up with the level of service or the offerings.

These research findings supported Mueller and Kaufmann's (2001) interpretation of wellness that included environmental sensitivity/contact, however, this study is the first to highlight the importance of relationship building with staff in the wellness tourism context. Unlike traditional forms of travel, wellness travel often involves more in-depth relations between staff and guests. As such, the quality of service provided at wellness resorts is of utmost importance for creating memorable guest experiences that include relationship building with guests, which, in turn leads to long-term loyal guests. Often times, reviews mentioned staff leaving a long-term impact on their decision to continue their journey along the path of wellness, including future plans for wellness travel and continuous contact with the wellness tourism provider suggesting a trend towards loyalty.

Conclusions and recommendations

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question, what are the underlying dimensions of the wellness tourism experience and the mechanisms by which a wellness tourism experience provides support for holistic wellness? The findings indicate that in order to create a holistic sense of wellness for travellers, four main strategies based on the revealed dimensions, should be prioritized for the sustained development of the wellness tourism industry. First, in the dimension of the body, companies should take note that, while this can prove to be a mechanism to support holistic wellness, special attention should be paid to make sure it does not become a barrier. A clear indication of the physical demands that will be expected for specific wellness programmes should be well-defined. While it is important for companies to focus on the outcome of 'feeling good',

misrepresentations in this area should be avoided, as it will lead to lower levels of consumer satisfaction and a tainted company image. Specific attention should be paid to describing the type of food that will be offered, including pictures and videos chronicling the dining experience and its connection to the local community. This type of branding will help potential wellness guests to understand the holistic benefits of culinary experiences at wellness resorts as opposed to other types of facilities. Additionally, the schedules for activities and services should be clear prior to guests arriving to avoid any confusion, especially for short-term visitors. Lastly, those guests wanting to take part in a detox vacation should be made well aware of some of the possible unpleasant side effects and given a minimum stay requirement to avoid negative experiences. While the road to wellness does garner amazing results, wellness resorts need to be clear about what is involved in the entire process.

Second, the mental aspect of wellness travel should be highlighted and exposed as a mechanism by which participants can experience holistic wellness. Results consistently and clearly illustrated experiences related to growth and transformation. This outcome of wellness travel is difficult to manage because it is intangible and subjective. A focused approach on testimonies provided by past visitors as well as scientific research providing evidence to show the benefits of this type of travel is suggested. Third, an emphasis geared towards solo travellers is warranted. Many reviewers commented on the power of shared experiences with others while traveling alone. Wellness tourism companies should capitalize on this, and highlight its potential positive impact on holistic wellness, as this is one of few forms of tourism where tourists should feel comfortable traveling alone.

Lastly, a focus on creating and sustaining an environment conducive to wellness is paramount to wellness tourism providers. Many of the wellness resorts in this study were not designed to be budget friendly. With this being the case, the attention to detail of service and offerings is vital to long-term success. A beautiful setting is simply not enough for the wellness traveller. Additionally, with attention to wellness becoming more and more widespread, it is important for companies to expand their offerings to be inclusive of a lower socio-economic bracket. The results from this study revealed a clear pattern amongst online wellness reviewers with regards to the mechanisms by which experiences can lead to a higher level of wellness versus those experiences that detract from a holistic state of wellness. In conclusion, this study provides new insights for wellness tourism companies surrounding the ideas of relationship building with staff, gastronomic experiences, personal growth, self-development and community atmospheres.

Future research and limitations

In order to augment the findings from this study, future research on wellness tourism experiences should incorporate other methods of qualitative analysis (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, etc.) as well as quantitative techniques to understand the predictive relational and longitudinal aspects of wellness tourism. More specifically, these studies could focus on examining the specific pathways and barriers wellness tourists face through primary data collection methods. Further to this, future research should focus more specifically on an explicit type of wellness tourism (e.g. yoga tourism) in order to understand the underlying dimensions unique to these types of tourists. Additionally, future studies should consider wellness tourism different cultural contexts. This research provided an expansion on the understanding of wellness tourism experiences that will help in the planning and management of wellness tourism experiences, however, it is not without limitations. Due to the nature of the data collected for this study, it was restricted to only those wellness travellers that choose to review their experience online. Additionally, the focus of this study was on twenty wellness resorts, chosen using a stratified random sampling method within 100 companies, which cannot necessarily be considered representative of the entire population of wellness resorts. Results from this study were based solely on reviews published on TripAdvisor.com. With this limitation in mind, it was assumed that all reviews provided for this study were honest. It is acknowledged that the source of this data does present difficulties in generalizability of this study. Therefore, it is advised that other researchers take caution in generalizing results from this

research. It is advised that this research is further validated through other sources of data on wellness tourism experiences.

Note

1. Company names have been changed to protect privacy.

Disclosure statement

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