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To cite this article: Erose Sthapit, Chunli Ji, Mingwei Li, Brian Garrod, Blend Ibrahim & Peter Björk (06 Mar 2025): Memorable wellness tourism experiences: antecedents that lead to enjoyable outcomes, International Journal of Spa and Wellness, DOI: [10.1080/24721735.2025.2473124](https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2025.2473124)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2025.2473124>



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Published online: 06 Mar 2025.



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Memorable wellness tourism experiences: antecedents that lead to enjoyable outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Wellbeing is a popular tourism motivation, and wellness tourism is a growing market segment in many places around the world. Contrary to existing studies replicating Kim, J. H., Ritchie, J. R. B., & McCormick, B. [(2012). Development of a scale to measure memorable tourism experiences. *Journal of Travel Research*, 51(1), 12–25]. Seven-dimensional memorable tourism experience scale (hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty) in new settings, this study uses stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) theory as a conceptual foundation to develop and test an integrative model of memorable tourism experiences within the context of wellness tourism. Escapism, co-creation, experience intensification and satisfaction are taken as potential antecedents of memorable wellness tourism experiences, while hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being and place attachment are considered potential consequences. A survey was conducted to gather data from Chinese tourists over the age of 18 years who had a wellness tourism experience during the period February–July 2024. The empirical results suggest that the greater the level of escapism, co-creation, experience intensification and satisfaction, the more memorable the wellness tourism experience; while a more memorable wellness tourism experience will lead to greater hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being and place attachment. This study concludes by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings, while providing recommendations for future research.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 November 2024
Accepted 18 February 2025

KEYWORDS

Wellness tourism; memorable wellness tourism experience; escapism; co-creation; satisfaction; hedonic well-being

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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1. Introduction

In the post-Covid-19 era, people are giving greater priority to leading a healthy lifestyle and maintaining their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being (Xia et al., 2024). This is reflected both in their day-to-day activities and in their tourism choices, with the search for well-being becoming an increasingly important motivation for tourism (Al-Ansi et al., 2024). This is exemplified by the growing interest in tourism visits to healing retreats, health spas, and wellness resorts (Goyal & Taneja, 2023). Such activities deliver health and wellness benefits directly, for example by providing tourists with opportunities to unwind and relax, thereby lowering stress levels and promoting better mental health (Liu et al., 2024). What is sometimes not recognised, however, is that the activities concerned can also enhance tourists' well-being by serving as enjoyable and satisfying experiences in their own right (Backman et al., 2023). Wellness tourism in the Chinese market holds distinctive importance, spurred by an accelerated growth in domestic demand for health and wellness experiences. This trend is attributed to increasing disposable incomes and evolving lifestyle preferences among the populace. In 2022, the Chinese wellness tourism sector exhibited significant growth, achieving a market value of RMB 1,309 billion (Market Monitor, 2023). Forecasts suggest that by 2028, the global wellness tourism market will expand to RMB 8,731 billion, with China's share expected to reach RMB 163 billion (Foresight Industry Research Institute, 2023). This projection not only underscores the transformative influence of wellness tourism on the Chinese economy but also affirms its pivotal role in steering the future direction of the global wellness tourism industry.

The proposition that people are seeking memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) is now widely accepted in the tourism literature. Hosany et al. (2022), for example, argue that delivering MTEs, rather than simply supplying tourist services, is now the central focus of most tourism activity. There is also a broad consensus that the essential distinction between services and experiences is that the latter are not only enjoyable and provide satisfaction at the time they are delivered but are also the subject of positive, long-term memories for those involved (Kim et al., 2012). Tourism service providers have thus been forced to focus on making their offers more experiential, and hence more memorable, to satisfy ever-increasing customer expectations (Sthapit et al., 2024a). Tourists who have MTEs are also more likely to revisit the destination (Tiwari et al., 2024) and to recommend it to others (Keskin et al., 2024). Offering MTEs has thus become crucial to a destination's competitiveness, and destination managers have found it prudent to develop tourism activities, facilities and services aimed at making the tourist's visit memorable (Hosany et al., 2022).

There is much less consensus in the tourism literature, however, with respect to what makes an experience memorable (Hosany et al., 2022). An early study by Kim et al. (2012) found seven antecedents of MTEs, those being hedonism, refreshment, meaningfulness, local culture, involvement, knowledge and novelty. Many of the studies that have followed have simply taken these seven dimensions and attempted to apply them in a variety of new settings (Sthapit et al., 2019). The results have, however, been mixed (Adongo et al., 2015; Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015; Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018), with some studies strongly supporting Kim et al.'s model, others finding limited support for it, and others finding almost no support. According

to Chandralal and Valenzuela (2015), one likely reason for this is that Kim et al. used a student sample which was not, therefore, representative of tourists. This implies that their model, including the seven dimensions of MTEs they identified, cannot reliably be generalised to tourism, let alone particular forms or instances of the phenomenon.

Another potential issue with Kim et al.'s (2012) study relates to time-lag bias. This is due to respondents being asked to evaluate their tourism experiences over the previous five years. Empirical studies indicate that memory distortion tends to intensify over time (Park & Santos, 2017). Tourists are less likely to have a reliable memory of their experiences from five years ago than they are from those they have just had. Asking tourists to recall and rate those memories against one another is thus unlikely to produce reliable results.

A further limitation of previous studies is that relatively few have included other constructs that might be useful to explain MTEs (Sthapit et al., 2024a). It can be argued that MTEs are such a multifaceted concept that it would be surprising that one set of seven dimensions could effectively capture how MTEs are formed, regardless of the specific context in which they are being studied (Stone et al., 2022). The formation of MTEs is believed to be highly dependent upon context (Sthapit et al., 2024a), and existing MTE studies do not fully account for these characteristics of different forms of tourism. This could potentially be case with niche forms of tourism such as wellness tourism, which by their nature are based on different motivations and activities. Moreover, relatively little is known about the interplay between features of wellness tourism experiences and the process through which tourists' memories of them are formed.

This study contributes to addressing these gaps in knowledge by focusing on the process by which memorable wellness tourism experiences (MWTEs) are formed. In doing so, the study develops and tests an empirical model that integrates four antecedents of MWTEs (escapism, co-creation, experience intensification, and satisfaction) and three outcomes (hedonic well-being, eudaimonic wellbeing, and place attachment). This is a novel approach in that previous studies have tended to focus on the replication of Kim et al.'s (2012) model, employing MTE measurement scales based on Kim et al.'s (2012) study, and using conventional outcome variables such as revisit intention (Hosany et al., 2022). This study, in contrast, focuses on integrating different antecedents into the MTE construct, thereby enhancing its complexity and depth. It also includes alternative outcome variables, such as hedonic well-being (HWB), eudaimonic well-being (EWB) and place attachment (PA). These alternative outcome variables are likely to be important in informing decision making by wellness tourism providers, tourism marketers and destination planners.

2. Theoretical background and formulation of hypotheses

2.1. Stimulus – organism – response theory

Some studies have examined MTEs through the lens of positive psychology, drawing from theories such as the theory of planned behaviour, the theory of savouring, and script theory. Others have drawn on theories from environmental psychology, sociology, organisational management and applied psychology (Hosany et al., 2022). The present study, however, employs stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) theory as a basis for developing and testing an integrated model of the antecedents and consequences of MWTEs.

Developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), S-O-R theory is based on the idea that stimuli (S) encountered in the decision-making environment impact upon an individual’s internal or “organismic” state (O), which in turn induces a particular behavioural response (R). Stimuli in the context of experiences could include, for example, ambiance and atmospherics (Kucukergin et al., 2020). In this study, escapism, co-creation and experience intensification are employed as the stimuli experienced during a wellness experience. The “organism” in S-O-R theory can be defined as the sum the “internal processes and structures intervening between stimuli external to the person and the final actions, reactions, or responses emitted” (Pandita et al., 2021, p. 3). Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) original model focused mainly on the cognitive and emotional states of the organism. In subsequent research in the tourism field, further S-O-R constructs have been added, including experiential value (Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2023), overall satisfaction (Chen et al., 2022) and memories (Manthiou et al., 2017). Recent studies indicate that either satisfaction (Hsu et al., 2021) or memorability (as measured by a variable that measures the extent to which MTEs are achieved), or a combination of the two, can effectively represent the internal state of the organism component in S-O-R theory (Chen et al., 2022). Satisfaction and MWTE thus represent the organism component in this study. Responses, meanwhile, were originally defined by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) as an individual’s approach or avoidance behaviours. In the context of tourism experiences, they can be taken to represent the final outcomes of the decision-making process, through which the benefits of the MTE are realised. Studies in the context of tourism often use revisit intention (Rodrigues et al., 2023) and positive word-of-mouth intention (Chen et al., 2022) for this purpose, as these are commonly adopted as markers of achievement by organisational decision-makers. It is also implied that a tourist who is willing to revisit the destination and/or speak to others positively about it must, by implication, have benefited from

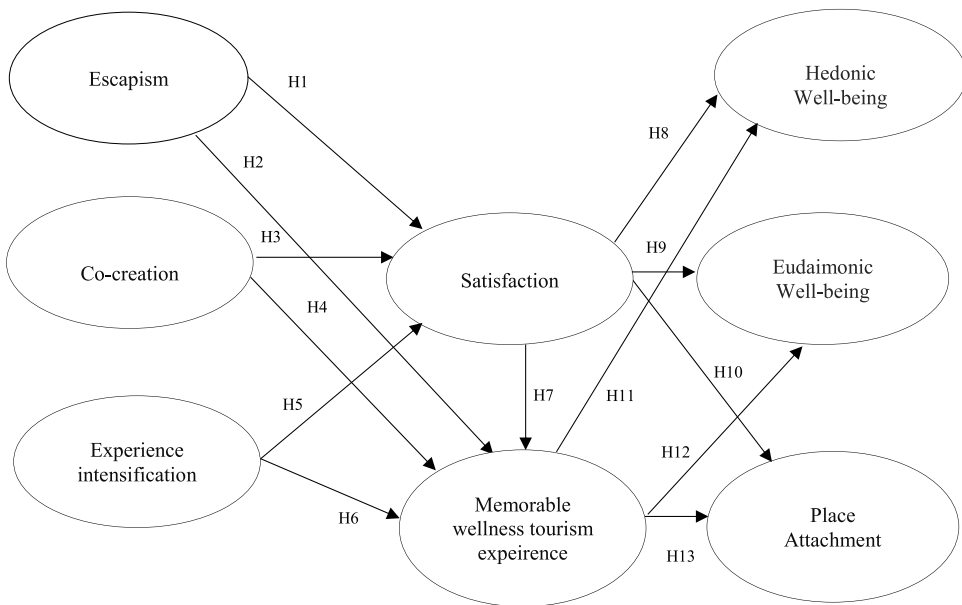


Figure 1. The conceptual model.

their visit. This study will, however, use HWB, EWB, and PA as the response constructs (see [Figure 1](#)). These variables more directly relate to the benefits that tourists will achieve when they have MWTEs. These responses will be more long-lasting than the organismic states tourists achieve while they are undertaking the MWTE. They are particularly important in the wellness-tourism context insofar as they indicate that the MWTE has successfully delivered long-lasting well-being benefits for tourists involved.

2.2. Wellness tourism

Wellness tourism is defined as an instance of tourism in which well-being acts as the main purpose for travel that is related to gaining wellness through a holistic approach, without medical treatment (Dimitrovski et al., 2024; Sthapit et al., 2023). Contrary to medical tourism, which usually includes travelling for medical intervention to treat or cure illness, wellness tourism is a personal lifestyle choice, wherein tourists look to attain an integrated state of health (body and spirit) during their holidays (He et al., 2023). Besides offering pleasurable and satisfying consumer experiences that boost personal well-being, these wellness trips can lower stress by balancing body, mind, and spirit (Backman et al., 2023). Today, the demand for wellness tourism is growing amid ever-increasing stress levels and offers new opportunities for businesses and destinations around the world (Dimitrovski et al., 2024). Recent studies linked to wellness tourism have been conducted in different cultural settings (Kim et al., 2024; Sangkakorn & Krajangchom, 2024). However, there, only a limited number of cross-cultural studies exist (Bočkus et al., 2024). A rare exception is Sangkakorn and Krajangchom's (2024) study, which examines the behaviours of wellness tourists in Northern Thailand with a view to summarising their collective preferences and expectations, thereby addressing a significant gap in research on Thai wellness tourism.

2.3. Escapism

MacCannell (1973) argues that tourism is motivated essentially by the desire to escape everyday life to experience other places, situations, and times. Tourism is thus considered to be a temporary diversion from everyday life (Barr et al., 2010), which frees people from their daily routines, allowing them to immerse themselves in new realities and different experiences (Ponsignon et al., 2021). When an individual escapes, they move from a state of being into a state of doing that is based on participation in a particular set of activities (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Sipe and Testa (2018) argue that escape is an important antecedent to many MTEs because tourism liberates those involved to understand their lives in new ways: a process that may also enhance the memorability of an experience (Leblanc, 2003).

Escapism is argued to be strongly associated with wellness tourism experiences (Luo et al., 2018). Indeed, wellness tourism offers tourists the opportunity to spend more time and effort on keeping fit, including eating a healthier diet. It also offers tourists a chance to leave behind the physical and mental stresses of their daily lives and to relax, regenerate and restore their bodies and minds. Recent studies have found a positive relationship between escapism and satisfaction (e.g. Sotiriadis, 2017) including MTEs (e.g. Chen et al., 2023; Dias & Dias, 2019; Sthapit et al., 2024b). The relationship has yet,

however, to be tested empirically in the MTWE context. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Escapism positively influences tourists' satisfaction

H2: Escapism positively influences tourists' MWTEs

2.4. Co-creation

The concept of co-creation is based on the theory of service-dominant logic (SDL), which focuses on the creation of value by facilitating reciprocally beneficial interaction between actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). According to Zatori et al. (2018), co-creating an experience involves the joint creation of value by service providers and customers, through which the resources provided by the former are integrated such that the resulting experiences match the personal needs and wants of the latter. The basic proposition of SDL is that collaborative interaction is a prerequisite for such co-creation to take place (Chathoth et al., 2016). High-quality face-to-face interactions are thus considered essential components of the process of co-creation (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In view of the tendency of tourism to be socially dense, the tourism experience can be understood to be both potentially highly interactive and thus essentially co-created (Helkkula et al., 2012). Given the importance of interaction in tourism experiences (Leong et al., 2024), co-creation of an experience may involve tourist encounters with staff, other guests and residents (Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014).

Even in the context of mass tourism, tourists usually also have considerable freedom to decide what to do during the stay (Mathis et al., 2016). This is even more the case in more modern forms of tourism, where independence is common. Studies suggest that both satisfaction (Prebensen & Xie, 2017) and memorability (Campos et al., 2017; Sthapit et al., 2024c) are likely outcomes of co-creation in the context of tourism and that these may be mutually reinforcing, in that greater satisfaction may result in more memorable experiences and vice versa.

As with tourism experiences generally, wellness experiences can involve the co-creation of intangible, customised and people-based experiences. In the context of this study, tourists may co-create their experiences through interaction both with staff and with other guests. Such interactions can impact significantly on the tourist's evaluation of a tourism experience (Leong et al., 2024). This means that the satisfaction an individual derives from wellness tourism can be measured in the same way as with other tourism experiences (Liu et al., 2023). The co-created value generated during MWTEs can thus be viewed as a potential source of tourist satisfaction, as well as a driver of experience memorability. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

H3: Co-creation positively influences tourists' satisfaction

H4: Co-creation positively influences tourists' MWTEs

2.5. Experience intensification

Tourists often attempt intensify their experiences and make them more tangible by taking photos and purchasing souvenirs (Dong & Siu, 2013). Taking photos of travel experiences

has become an essential part of an increasingly digitised society (Konijn et al., 2016). For example, a study by Stone et al. (2022) found that 94% of Chinese leisure travellers took photos of their experiences on at least half of their trips. Tourists report that photography makes experiences more enjoyable (Diehl et al., 2016) and increases their levels of happiness (Gillet et al., 2016). Photographs are also considered to be instrumental in not only creating but also strengthen tourists' memories of their experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). According to Sthapit et al. (2023), experience intensification – through, for example, taking pictures and buying souvenirs – serves to prolong the memories individuals have of their tourism experiences. The use of social media sites and online messaging is also an increasingly popular way of making such photos public, which can further serve to intensify the tourism experience, not only after it has taken place but increasingly, during it (Chen et al., 2023). In the context of tourism experiences, the taking of photographs and the sharing of them through social media are critical drivers of tourist satisfaction (Sthapit et al., 2024d; Wong et al., 2019) and help can embed the positive aspects of the experience into tourists' memories (Li et al., 2023; Sthapit et al., 2024d). Chen et al. (2023) found the sharing of wellness tourism experiences through social media to help tourists recall such experiences after returning home from a trip. Thus, the following hypotheses are thus proposed:

H5: Experience intensification positively influences tourists' satisfaction

H6: Experience intensification positively influences tourists' MWTEs

2.6. Satisfaction

According to Oliver (2014, p. 8), satisfaction is “a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment” in the perception of customers. Satisfaction is said to occur when the customer's subjective evaluation of the consumption experience meets or exceeds their prior expectation (Yu et al., 2022). According to expectation disconfirmation theory, expectation is the cognitive evaluation of the main attributes of an experience before it is purchased and consumed (Amin et al., 2021). Experiences can thus meet expectations, leading to positive confirmation and satisfaction (Yang et al., 2024), or fail to meet them, leading to negative disconfirmation and thus dissatisfaction (Bai et al., 2024). The more the experience positively exceeds the tourist's expectations, the greater the level of satisfaction that is derived (Yen & Yu, 2022). In the context of tourism, satisfaction reflects the tourist's perception of the tourism experience in comparison to their expectations and focuses on their overall evaluation of the experience after the point of consumption (Tran et al., 2021).

Satisfaction is critical for the success of any tourism experience (Saut & Bie, 2024). The degree of satisfaction a tourist receives can also shape other outcomes of the experience. In the case of this study, the variables concerned are taken to be MWTE, HWB, EWB and PA. Sthapit et al. (2023; 2024d) suggest a positive relationship between satisfaction and MTE. Some studies also indicate a positive relationship between satisfaction and HWB as well as between satisfaction and EWB (Ahn et al., 2019; Armbrecht & Andersson, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). It has also been argued that when tourists experience high levels of satisfaction at a destination, they become increasingly emotionally attached to it: a process known as PA (George & George, 2004). Some studies confirm that satisfaction can be an antecedent of PA, which is consistent with research in environmental psychology (Hernández et al., 2007;

Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015), tourism (Chen & Phou, 2013; Hosany et al., 2017) and marketing (Orth et al., 2010). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: Satisfaction positively influences tourists' MWTEs

H8: Satisfaction positively influences tourists' HWB

H9: Satisfaction positively influences tourists' EWB

H10: Satisfaction positively influences tourists' PA

2.7. Memorable wellness tourism experience, hedonic wellbeing, eudaimonic wellbeing and place attachment

Kim et al. (2012) defined MTE as an attitudinal construct that describes the positive memories of a tourist who has engaged in a particular tourism experience. The notion of MTE is thus based on tourists forming personal memories of the experiences they have had (Hosany et al., 2022). In the context of the present study, MWTE is defined as an experience that generates positive memories that can later be recalled in substantial detail after a wellness tourism experience.

Tourism is understood at its most fundamental level to be an activity that is intended to increase a tourist's happiness. In this study, happiness is represented by HWB (Vada et al., 2019). The first, HWB, refers to the improvement of mood due to the feelings of pleasure and enjoyment an individual receives (Huta & Waterman, 2014, p. 1427). It is often assumed to be a transient increase (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Smith & Diekmann, 2017), but it has been argued that the effect can last beyond the duration of the experience, insofar as recalling an MTE can also increase a person's subjective well-being (Jepson et al., 2019). Some studies do indeed indicate a positive relationship between MTE and HWB (e.g. Bigné et al., 2020; Sthapit et al., 2024d; Trinanda et al., 2022). The eudaimonic view of well-being focuses on a person's understanding of the meaning of their life, personal growth and self-realisation. According to this view, EBW is defined as the degree to which a person functions fully in these respects. The concept is valuable because it distinguishes well-being from happiness, which tends to be more directly related to satisfaction (Gao et al., 2017). Some studies (e.g. Vada et al., 2019) have found a positive relationship between MTEs and EWB.

The present study also adopts PA as an output variable. According to Patwardhan et al. (2020), PA denotes the emotional bond that tends to exist between people and places. Tourism studies have generally employed the notions of place identity and place dependency to measure PA. Place identity refers to how far a place may be distinctive, which tends to increase as an individual accumulates experience of the place by living or making visits there (Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015). Place dependency, meanwhile, refers to functional attachment, meaning the extent to which interaction with a destination's resources meets a tourist's perceived needs (Loureiro, 2014). Some studies suggest that MTE is influential in the development of PA (Sthapit et al., 2023; Vada et al., 2019). Sthapit et al. (2023), for example, indicated that halal tourism can enable tourists to generate MTE, which in turn increases their identification with the destination and their PA. It has also been found that PA with respect to a tourism destination is partly

determined by MTE (Sthapit et al., 2017). The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

H11: MWTE positively influences tourists' HWB

H12: MWTE positively influences tourists' EWB

H13: MWTE positively influences tourists' PA

3. Method

3.1. Data collection methods and instruments

The data used in this study were collected through a self-administered, online questionnaire. Respondents were Chinese tourists aged 18 years and over, who had undertaken a holiday where the main purpose was to participate in one or more wellness activities (e.g. visits to thermal water, hot springs and spas, including undertaking meditation, yoga, Pilates and massage) within the six months preceding the data-collection period (February–July 2024). A sample comprising Chinese tourists was chosen because China ranks first in terms of the growth of wellness tourism activity markets worldwide (Xia et al., 2024). A relatively short window of six months was used to screen for eligible respondents because studies suggest that memories tend to become increasingly distorted over time (Park & Santos, 2017). If a longer time period was used, there would be a danger that respondents' memories could be overly positive or negative due to this effect (Sthapit et al., 2019). Respondents were recruited using convenience sampling because of the lack of availability of a suitable sampling frame. The key advantages of convenience sampling are that it is cheap, efficient, and simple to implement (Jager et al., 2017). However, the authors acknowledge that the main limitation of this sampling technique is that the sample is not necessarily representative of the sampling population, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Caution is therefore required when applying the findings of any study based on convenience sampling.

The survey questionnaire was organised in two sections, the first of which comprised demographic variables and travel characteristics, while the second comprised the measurement items relating to the eight key variables presented above. In total, the questionnaire consisted of 34 items. These variables were all measured using items taken from previous studies and modified to fit the current research context (see Appendix). Each of the items was scored on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" or "does not describe my opinions" and 7 representing "strongly agree" or "clearly describes my opinions". Since the entire target population was Chinese, the questionnaire was administered in Chinese.

Given that the measurement scales were sourced from English literature, the original scales were adapted and validated to fit the context of Chinese wellness tourism. Initially, the items were translated into Chinese by a bilingual expert familiar with both the wellness tourism context and the nuances of the Chinese language. This translation was then reviewed by another bilingual expert to ensure semantic equivalence and cultural appropriateness. The translated items were further refined through a back-translation process, where the Chinese version was translated back into English by an independent translator to check for consistency and accuracy.

Furthermore, before conducting the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested to assess its readability, clarity, comprehensibility and correctness of response format. Twenty undergraduate and postgraduate students were first asked to evaluate each item in terms of the above four aspects. Five tourism and hospitality professors, all based in China, were then asked to confirm whether the measures could be considered valid within the Chinese cultural context. The professors assessed the phrasing, clarity, relevance, and flow of the questions, ensuring that the items were culturally appropriate and meaningful for Chinese wellness tourists. All those involved in the pre-test were encouraged to raise any issues they had difficulty responding to or found unclear or ambiguous. Based on their feedback, a small number of changes were made to the questionnaire, primarily clarifying sentence structures and correcting grammatical errors. These changes were minor in nature but essential for ensuring the questionnaire's validity and reliability in the specific context of this study.

Several filter questions were asked to ensure that the survey was correctly targeted, including "Are you 18 years old or over?", "Are you a Chinese national?", and "Have you recently undertaken a holiday and your main motivation to undertake this trip was wellness and participation in a wellness activity (e.g. visits to thermal water, hot springs and spas, including undertaking meditation, yoga, Pilates retreats and massage)?" Those who responded negatively were not permitted to participate in the survey.

The survey was distributed using the SurveyPlus Online System during September 2024. A professional market research company based in Shenzhen, China, assisted in this process. The company distributed survey links to a random sample of 1,900 members drawn from their customer database, which comprises hundreds of thousands of members across various regions of China. Data collection was terminated upon reaching the predetermined number of survey completions. Those respondents who provided positive answers to the filter questions and fully completed the questionnaire received a modest monetary reward (a 10 RMB WeChat red envelope: 微信红包). Respondents were told that their responses would be checked, and that compensation would be withheld if there was any indication of irrelevant or random responses. Completed questionnaires were nevertheless screened for invalid responses, with a small number being discarded. After then removing a further 12 responses with missing data, a total of 512 valid responses were retained for analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using two statistical software packages. SPSS, chosen for its ability to manage and display descriptive statistics, was used to examine the characteristics of the sample along with a segmentation of respondents. SmartPLS 4.0 was then used to construct and test the model. It was chosen because it has the necessary flexibility to handle reflective variables. It is also able to handle non-normal data and use relatively small sample sizes, such as that collected for the present study (Ringle et al., 2015).

Table 1 shows that just over two thirds of the respondents were female (68.0%), while 99.8% were Chinese nationals. The highest proportion of respondents (48.2%) was in the 26–35 age group. Most respondents (62.3%) had participated in wellness tourism for the first time, and more than two thirds (67.2%) had been accompanied a companion. In terms of marital status, the largest category was married (66.8%).

Table 1. Profiles of the respondents.

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	164	32.0%
	Female	348	68.0%
Chinese national	Yes	511	99.8%
	No	1	0.2%
Age	18–25	94	18.4%
	26–35	247	48.2%
	36–45	126	24.6%
	46–55	36	7.0%
	56 or older	9	1.8%
First-time participant	Yes	319	62.3%
	No	193	37.7%
Participating with a companion	Yes	344	67.2%
	No	168	32.8%
Marital status	Single	151	29.5%
	Engaged	17	3.3%
	Married	342	66.8%
	Divorced	2	0.4%

Partial least-squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural model analysis to investigate the relationships in the theoretical model. PLS-SEM is better able to handle non-normally distributed data than its main rival, covariance-based structural equation modelling (Hair et al., 2019). Indeed, Mardia's (1970) multivariate normality test showed that the multivariate skewness was $\beta = 174.486$ ($p < 0.01$), while the kurtosis was $\beta = 1477.876$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating the absence of a multivariate normal distribution.

4. Results

Kock (2015) recommends using variance inflation factor (VIF) values to test for common method bias in PLS-SEM using self-reported survey data. This study examined all the VIF values for the internal model and found them all to be less than 3.3, the threshold value below which Kock (2015) suggests common method bias is not a cause for concern. The study also followed Bagozzi et al.'s (1991) recommendation to check the bivariate correlations between constructs. None of the correlations between constructs exceeded 0.90, which indicates that there is no evidence of common method bias being present (Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2016).

4.1. Measurement model test

As a first step to conducting SEM analysis, CFA was conducted. Three items were dropped from further analysis as their factor loadings were below Hair et al.'s (2010) recommended threshold value of 0.6. Table 2 shows that the factor loadings for all the remaining items ranged from 0.628 to 0.860. For all constructs, the average variance extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.5, confirming convergent validity. Composite reliability of reflective measurement models (rho-A) and composite reliability (CR) values were then calculated for all constructs for the assessment of internal consistency and reliability. All such values exceeded Hair et al.'s (2021) recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating that the questionnaire had adequate internal consistency and reliability.

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity.

Construct and items	Factor loadings	rho_A	CR	AVE
Escapism (ESC)		0.707	0.817	0.529
I felt that I played a different character during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.761			
My recent wellness tourism experience let me imagine being someone else	0.774			
I completely escaped from daily life during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.628			
I felt like I was living in a different time or place during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.738			
Co-creation (CO)		0.817	0.872	0.577
Working alongside wellness staff and other guests allowed me to have a great social interaction during my recent wellness tourism experience, which I enjoyed	0.805			
I felt comfortable working with wellness staff and other tourists during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.776			
The setting allowed me to effectively collaborate with wellness staff and other tourists during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.777			
My recent wellness tourism experience was enhanced by my participation in the experience	0.702			
I felt confident in my ability to collaborate with wellness staff and other guests during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.733			
Experience intensification (EIN)		0.743	0.837	0.634
I purchased souvenirs during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.685			
I took memorable pictures during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.832			
Pictures help keep my recent wellness tourism experience alive	0.860			
Satisfaction (ESA)		0.706	0.831	0.622
My recent wellness tourism experience was beyond my expectations	0.733			
I really liked my recent wellness tourism experience	0.847			
It was worthwhile partaking in wellness tourism	0.781			
Memorable wellness tourism experience (MWTE)		0.715	0.840	0.637
I have wonderful memories of my recent wellness tourism experience	0.770			
I will not forget my recent wellness tourism experience	0.808			
I will remember my recent wellness tourism experience	0.815			
Hedonic well-being (HWB)		0.819	0.878	0.643
In most ways, my recent wellness tourism experience was close to ideal	0.798			
The conditions of my recent wellness tourism experience were excellent	0.822			
I am satisfied with my recent wellness tourism experience	0.779			
I achieved the most important things during my recent wellness tourism experience	0.809			
Eudaimonic well-being (EWB)		0.728	0.846	0.647
I feel like living life one day at a time	0.740			
I feel like I have a sense of direction and purpose in life	0.843			
I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality	0.827			
Place attachment (PA)		0.872	0.903	0.608
I identify strongly with the visited wellness tourism destination	0.755			
Holidaying in this wellness tourism destination means a lot to me	0.742			
I am very attached to this wellness tourism destination	0.799			
Holidaying in this wellness tourism destination is more important to me than holidaying in other places	0.796			
I will not substitute this wellness tourism destination for any other place because of the experience I had there	0.796			
I get more satisfaction out of holidaying in this wellness tourism destination than from visiting similar destinations	0.790			

Discriminant validity was verified of all constructs, using the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). As shown in Table 3, the square root of the AVE for each of the latent constructs was greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations, indicating that discriminant validity was acceptable for all constructs.

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Constructs	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
ESC (1)	0.727							
CO (2)	0.598	0.760						
EWB (3)	0.421	0.566	0.804					
HWB (4)	0.614	0.702	0.519	0.802				
EIN (5)	0.505	0.559	0.414	0.628	0.796			
MWTE (6)	0.573	0.668	0.483	0.747	0.614	0.798		
PA (7)	0.589	0.652	0.508	0.777	0.602	0.695	0.780	
SA (8)	0.537	0.719	0.458	0.728	0.545	0.740	0.655	0.789

Note: The values on the diagonal (in bold) represent the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE), and the values below the diagonal are the correlations between the variables.

4.2. Structural model test

Once the reliability and validity of the constructs has been verified based on the results of the measurement model, the structural model was constructed and analysed. The acceptability of the model was assessed using both the R^2 statistic and the Stone-Geisser indicator (Q^2). The R^2 values were 0.553 for satisfaction, 0.635 for MWTE, 0.624 for HWB, 0.253 for EWB and 0.525 for PA. These were all greater than the threshold value of 0.02 suggested by Cohen (2013). The Q^2 values were 0.337 for satisfaction, 0.399 for MWTE, 0.398 for HWB, 0.162 for EWB and 0.312 for PA. These were all greater than the threshold value of zero recommended by Hair et al. (2014). The R^2 and Q^2 values therefore indicate that the proposed is robust.

According to Hair et al. (2019), path coefficients measure the strength and direction relationships between the constructs in the structural model. In the present study, a non-parametric bootstrap technique using 5,000 repetitions was employed to estimate the path coefficients. The results of the hypothesis testing are shown in Table 4 and indicate that the effect of escapism on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.119$, $t = 2.631$, $p = 0.009$) and on MWTE ($\beta = 0.138$, $t = 2.954$, $p = 0.003$) were significant at the level of 0.01, thus supporting H1 and H2. The effects of co-creation on both satisfaction ($\beta = 0.548$, $t = 11.105$, $p = 0.000$) and MWTE ($\beta = 0.143$, $t = 2.722$, $p = 0.007$) were significant at the level of 0.01. For H3 and H4 were also therefore supported (Figure 2).

The results show that experience intensification had a positive and significant effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.179$, $t = 3.377$, $p = 0.001$) at the level of 0.01, and on MWTE ($\beta = 0.224$, $t =$

Table 4. Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypotheses relationship	β value	SD	t -values	p -values	Result
H1: ESC \rightarrow SA	0.119	0.045	2.631	0.009	Supported
H2: ESC \rightarrow MWTE	0.138	0.047	2.954	0.003	Supported
H3: CO \rightarrow SA	0.548	0.049	11.105	0.000	Supported
H4: CO \rightarrow MWTE	0.143	0.053	2.722	0.007	Supported
H5: EIN \rightarrow SA	0.179	0.053	3.377	0.001	Supported
H6: EIN \rightarrow MWTE	0.224	0.049	4.529	0.000	Supported
H7: SA \rightarrow MWTE	0.441	0.045	9.733	0.000	Supported
H8: SA \rightarrow HWB	0.387	0.043	9.016	0.000	Supported
H9: SA \rightarrow EWB	0.223	0.061	3.671	0.000	Supported
H10: SA \rightarrow PA	0.313	0.064	4.859	0.000	Supported
H11: MWTE \rightarrow HWB	0.461	0.041	11.161	0.000	Supported
H12: MWTE \rightarrow EWB	0.319	0.064	4.983	0.000	Supported
H13: MWTE \rightarrow PA	0.464	0.059	7.904	0.000	Supported

Note: ESC = Escapism, CO = Co-creation, EIN = Experience intensification, SA = Satisfaction, MWTE = Memorable wellness tourism experience, HWB = Hedonic well-being, EWB = Eudaimonic well-being, PA = Place attachment.

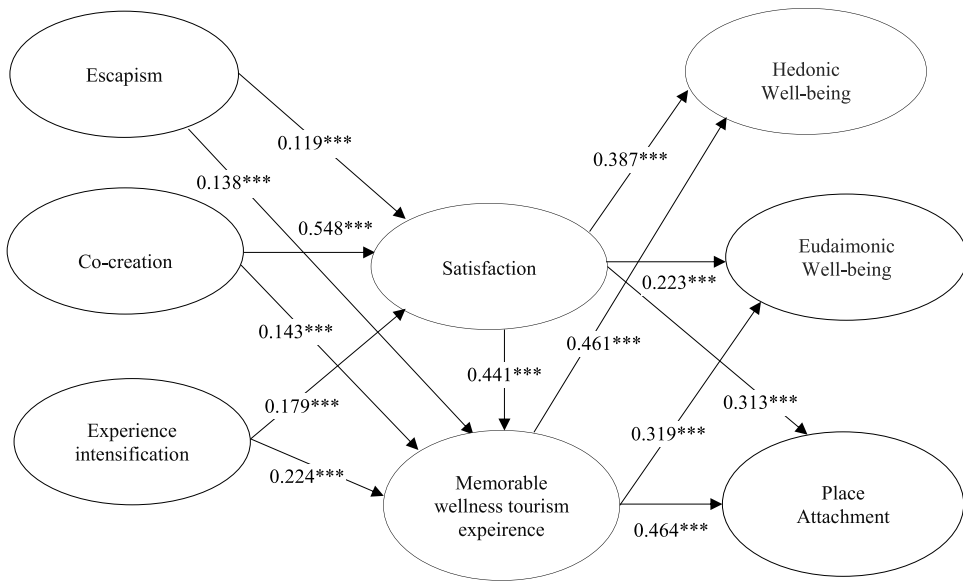


Figure 2. The validated conceptual model.

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

4.529, $p = 0.000$) at the level of 0.001, thus supporting H5 and H6. Additionally, the findings show that satisfaction had a positive and significant effect on MWTE ($\beta = 0.441$, $t = 9.733$, $p = 0.000$), HWB ($\beta = 0.387$, $t = 9.016$, $p = 0.000$), EWB ($\beta = 0.223$, $t = 3.671$, $p = 0.000$) and PA ($\beta = 0.313$, $t = 4.859$, $p = 0.000$) at the level of 0.001, thereby supporting H7, H8, H9 and H10 respectively. The results also indicate that MWTE had a positive and significant effect on HWB ($\beta = 0.461$, $t = 11.161$, $p = 0.000$), EWB ($\beta = 0.319$, $t = 4.983$, $p = 0.000$) and PA ($\beta = 0.464$, $t = 7.904$, $p = 0.000$) at the level of 0.001. H11, H12 and H13 are also therefore supported.

To check the robustness of PLS-SEM, the study adopted the approaches suggested by Sarstedt et al. (2020) to analyse nonlinear effects, endogeneity, and unobserved heterogeneity. The results from the Regression Equation Specification Error Test indicate that the structural model of this study is robust in terms of linear effects (Vaithilingam et al., 2024), as no non-linearities were detected. Additionally, the Gaussian copula results show that none of the copulas are statistically significant, which suggests that endogeneity is not a concern in the structural model (Sarstedt et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Finite Mixture Partial Least Squares (FIMIX-PLS) analysis reveals no segmentation, as the AIC3 and CAIC values for the one-segment model are lower than those for the two-segment model, and the entropy value for the two-segment model is below 0.5 (Saleem et al., 2021), confirming that unobserved heterogeneity will influence the established model.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study builds on the MTE model proposed by Kim et al. (2012) by incorporating factors that may affect and be affected by MTE in the specific context of wellness

tourism. Thirteen hypotheses were tested, and all achieved empirical support. First, a higher level of escapism was found to correlate with a higher level of satisfaction and a more memorable MWTE. This corresponds with studies suggesting a positive relationship between escapism and satisfaction in other contexts (e.g. Sotiriadis, 2017) as well as in the context of MTEs (e.g. Chen et al., 2023; Dias & Dias, 2019). In the context of wellness tourism, experiencing escapism could involve achieving flow: a mental state in which participants are able to “switch off” from their everyday concerns (Dilmaç & Tezcan, 2024). Participating in spa treatments or yoga classes, for example, could facilitate this.

Second, co-creation was found to exert a positive impact on both satisfaction and MWTE. This is not unexpected given that this hypothesis lies at the heart of the theory of the experience co-creation (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Indeed, a range of papers have found that co-creation impacts positively on tourist satisfaction (Prebensen & Xie, 2017) and MWTE (Campos et al., 2017). As a niche form of tourism, wellness tourism provides a number of opportunities for co-co-creation to occur. For example, a wellness resort could work with their guests to develop personal diet plans for use during their stay.

Third, experience intensification is a positive and statistically significant factor affecting Chinese tourists’ satisfaction. This supports studies indicating a positive relationship between experience intensification and satisfaction (Li et al., 2023). In addition, the relationship between experience intensification and MWTE was supported. Such findings support studies indicating that experience intensification is an antecedent of MTE (Chen et al., 2023).

Fourth, satisfaction was a predictor of MWTE, indicating that satisfaction exerts a direct and positive impact on the memorability of Chinese tourists’ wellness tourism experiences. This finding corroborates those of the study Sthapit et al. (2023), which also found a positive relationship between these two constructs.

As such, the study confirms the view that the antecedents of MTEs are essentially contextual. As such, the model presented by Kim et al.’s (2012) model cannot be considered to constitute a general model of MTEs but one that is specific to the context in which it was undertaken. This suggests that there may be a wider set of antecedent variables from which to draw when modelling MTEs, including those used in this study but potentially others also.

Two conclusions of this study are, however, also relevant beyond the immediate context of wellness tourism. First, the relationships between satisfaction on the one hand, and HWB, EWB and PA respectively on the other, were all supported. This underscores insights from studies indicating that satisfaction contributes to favourable HWB and EWB (Ahn et al., 2019; Armbrrecht & Andersson, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024), as well as those that found a positive impact of satisfaction on PA (George & George, 2004). Second, positive relationships between MWTE, on the one hand, and HWB, MWTE and EWB and PA respectively on the other, were also confirmed by the results of this study. This suggests that a more memorable a wellness tourism experience will tend to be associated with greater HWB, EWB and PA. This result is consistent with studies that have identified a positive relationship between MTE and HWB (Bigné et al., 2020; Trinanda et al., 2022), MTE and EWB (Vada et al., 2019) and MTE and PA (Sthapit et al., 2023; Vada et al., 2019). As such, this study concludes that there is a better case for considering these outcomes of MTEs to be generalisable, even if this cannot

be assumed regarding the antecedents of MTEs. The recommendations for improving managerial practices can therefore be considered specific to the wellness tourism segment in terms of the antecedents of MTEs, while the conclusions relating to the outcomes can be applied more widely.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study makes three main additions to the current state of knowledge regarding the development and effects of MWTEs. First, the study identifies and confirms non-traditional antecedents of tourists' MTEs, which are different to the seven MTE dimensions found in Kim et al.'s original study (Sthapit et al., 2019). This responds to demands from the tourism literature for research that applies the MTE concept in different tourism contexts (Stone et al., 2022) in the context of MWTEs. The present study suggests that Kim et al.'s (2012) key experience dimensions may not be the most robust and insightful way to analyse every instance or type of tourism.

This study has therefore introduced and tested further variables that may serve as antecedents of MTEs specifically in the wellness tourism context. The results suggest that MWTEs are driven by a combination of escapism, co-creation, and experience intensification. The study is also notable in that it focuses upon Chinese tourists, studies focusing on which are limited studies in the instance of wellness tourism. Given that there have been concerns raised over the adequacy of Kim et al.'s seven experience factors in the case of Chinese nationals, this study also suggests that a different set of antecedents may be important. As such, this study provides further clarity and contributes to increasing our understanding of the MTE phenomenon. The results of this study can thus guide future research.

Second, the findings contribute to the literature on wellness tourism experiences and indicate that MWTE may constitute an alternative route to HWB, EWB and PA that avoids satisfaction. Even wellness tourism trips that are not especially satisfying may generate HWB, EWB and PA provided they are co-created as memorable experiences. Beyond examining the various antecedents of MWTE, this study thus identifies MWTE as a significant predictor of HWB, EWB and PA in its own right. This advances the collective understanding of the outcomes of MWTEs.

Third, this study adds to the literature on S-O-R theory by applying it in the novel context of wellness tourism. S-O-R theory proposes that various environmental stimuli (in this case, escapism, co-creation, and experience intensification) influence an individual's cognitive and affective organismic responses (in this case satisfaction and MWTE), which in turn cause response behaviours (in this case HWB, EWB, and PA). This study confirms that S-O-R theory can be both robust and insightful as a framework to understand both the determinants and outcomes of MWTE.

5.2. Managerial implications

This study has identified a number of ways in which wellness tourism service providers can facilitate satisfactory and memorable wellbeing tourism experiences more effectively. First, this study suggests that wellness tourism providers should offer experiences that facilitate escapism. This would be most likely when the tourist becomes immersed in

the activity and experiences a state of flow. It is believed that flow is attained when the level of challenge involved in the activity is matched with participants' skills. Wellness tourism providers are therefore advised to make sure that a wide range of activities are available as part of the wellness experience. These should offer varying levels of challenge. They could include, for example, fitness gym work, yoga, nature walks, Pilates, arts and crafts, and music-making. Such activities, if properly matched to individual tourists' interests and skills, can help them lose themselves in the activity and forget about the routine tasks of their everyday life. Health resorts also, in themselves, offer tourists a chance to escape the fast pace of modern life by providing an environment that encourages self-care, slowing down and relaxing. The model suggests that this will further contribute to their satisfaction and MWTE, which in turn will increase their HWB, EWB and PA.

Another important implication of this study is that wellness tourism providers should consider guests active co-creators of their individual wellness experiences, rather than passive recipients of the services they offer them. Co-creative experiences can take place on a one-to-one basis between members of staff and guests (e.g. personalised fitness training) or in a group interaction setting (e.g. tai chi sessions to start the day). Wellness tourists must actually put some effort into these experiences if they are to receive the benefits they seek. Wellness tourism providers should therefore be actively involved in assisting tourists to co-create their wellness experiences. This may take the form of interactive participation in the experience on the part of the provider, for example, by making sure they receive plenty of advice about healthy eating practices, mindfulness techniques, fitness instruction, and various approaches to physical and mental wellbeing. Doing so should help to capture and maintain tourists' interest, enabling them to have a satisfactory experience and maximise time use during their wellness tourism experience. During in-situ wellness tourism experience co-creation, guests should be the focus of attention, while interactions should be used to help visitors acquire satisfying experiences. This calls for a shift in service providers' role from managers to experience co-creators. The focus should also be on training staff to promote co-creation during on-site wellness tourism experiences. This could include, for example, training staff to provide personalised consultations, such as developing a diet plan or personal fitness training programme with individual guests. It could also involve ensuring that staff know how to match guests with their interests and the level of challenge required to enable them to achieve a state of flow.

The study also found that there are realistic ways to heighten the memorability of the experience, for example by taking photos and videos, and by purchasing souvenirs and other memorabilia to take home with them. Wellness tourism providers can assist in this by encouraging guests to take photographs, as well to purchase souvenirs from their visit. The latter might take the form of branded wellness equipment and clothing, books and DVDs. Indeed, this study suggests that experience intensification results in greater satisfaction and memorability for wellness tourists. Attempts to discourage taking photographs should be avoided. Instead, wellness service providers should offer suitable spots for photographs to be taken and provide curated photo opportunities. These might, for example, use interesting backgrounds or smart technology (for example, to place the subject of the photo with a sporting celebrity). Tourists should also be encouraged to upload their pictures and videos onto social media platforms, as this will serve to strengthen their satisfaction, memorability and ultimately their HWB, EWB and PA.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study has a number of limitations, which must be acknowledged. Knowledge of these can inform future research. First, this study is both activity- and destination-specific. Second, the results of this study cannot be considered to be directly transferable because of the moderate sample size and the use of convenience sampling. Future studies should adopt random sampling techniques to improve generalizability of the results. More reliance should be put on the structure of the model than specific size effects. This is why coefficient sizes are not further discussed in this paper beyond reporting them. Third, an online survey was used. Future studies could use different research methods, for example, focus groups and in-depth interviews with respondents who describe their experiences soon after their trip to overcome this limitation. It is indeed argued that storytelling is key to understanding travel experiences (McCabe & Foster, 2006). This is because stories are particularly useful in conveying memories of events and occasions that unfold over time.

Fourth, this study was limited to four antecedents and three outcomes of MWTEs. Future studies should examine different mixes of antecedents. For example, researchers could analyse the complexity of wellness tourism, existential authenticity (Taheri et al., 2020) and digital detox (Hassan & Saleh, 2024). This study does, however, provide a solid basis for further exploration of antecedents and outcomes. In addition, future studies could be used to confirm that MWTE affects tourists' behavioural intentions, such as revisit intention and WOM intention. These are conventional variables that have been found to be significant outcomes of MTEs in previous studies, but it may be worth confirming their role in the case of MWTEs specifically.

Fifth, the study used a relatively small number of participants, who were all Chinese nationals. Given the cultural specificity of the sample and that there tend to be cross-cultural differences in tourism experiences, future research focusing on cross-cultural validation and using samples from different populations, including African, Arab, or Western respondents, should be prioritised as a way of validating the findings of the present study. Such studies could generate significant theoretical and practical implications.

Sixth, the data for this study were collected during the post-visit stage of participants' wellness trips using convenience sampling. As such, they relied on participants being able to recall memories from February to July 2024, i.e. up to six months previously. Future studies could collect data from tourists soon after their visits. Finally, comparative studies of first-time and repeat visitors and longitudinal studies exploring the long-term effects of MWTEs on well-being and place attachment could yield further meaningful insights.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the support of the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 72202115) for funding the data collection for this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix. Operationalisation of the constructs used in this study (sources of variables and measurement items)

Escapism (Oh et al., 2007)

- X1: I felt that I played a different character during my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X2: My recent wellness tourism experience let me imagine being someone else.
- X3: I completely escaped from daily life during my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X4: I felt like I was living in a different time or place during my recent wellness tourism experience.

Co-creation (Mathis et al., 2016)

- X5: Working alongside wellness staff and other guests allowed me to have a great social interaction during my recent wellness tourism experience, which I enjoyed.
- X6: I felt comfortable working with wellness staff and other tourists during my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X7: The setting allowed me to effectively collaborate with wellness staff and other tourists during my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X8: My recent wellness tourism experience was enhanced by my participation in the experience.
- X9: I felt confident in my ability to collaborate with wellness staff and other guests during my recent wellness tourism experience.

Experience intensification (Dong & Siu, 2013)

- X10: I purchased souvenirs during my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X11: I took memorable pictures during my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X12: Pictures help keep my recent wellness tourism experience alive.

Satisfaction (Wu et al., 2018)

- X13: My recent wellness tourism experience was beyond my expectations.
- X14: I really liked my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X15: It was worthwhile partaking in wellness tourism.

Memorable wellness tourism experience (Oh et al., 2007)

- X16: I have wonderful memories of my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X17: I will not forget my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X18: I will remember my recent wellness tourism experience.

Hedonic well-being (Diener et al., 1985)

- X19: In most ways, my recent wellness tourism experience was close to ideal.
- X20: The conditions of my recent wellness tourism experience were excellent.
- X21: I am satisfied with my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X22: I achieved the most important things during my recent wellness tourism experience.
- X23: I would not change the plans I made for this recent wellness trip.

Eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 1989)

- X24: I feel like living life one day at a time.
- X25: I feel like I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.
- X26: I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality.

Place attachment (Gross & Brown, 2008; Yuksel et al., 2010)

Place identity

- X27: The visited wellness tourism destination is very special to me.
- X28: I identify strongly with the visited wellness tourism destination.
- X29: Holidaying in this wellness tourism destination means a lot to me.
- X30: I am very attached to this wellness tourism destination.

Place dependence

- X31: Holidaying in this wellness tourism destination is more important to me than holidaying in other places.
- X32: This wellness tourism destination is the best place for what I like to do on holidays.
- X33: I will not substitute this wellness tourism destination for any other place because of the experience I had there.
- X34: I get more satisfaction out of holidaying in this wellness tourism destination than from visiting similar destinations.