

Healing Journeys and the Role of Critical Factors in Shaping Wellness Tourism Experiences in Karnataka, India**Rashmi R.*,**

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Abstract

Wellness tourism is one of the fastest-growing parts of the global tourism industry. This growth is fuelled by the rising demand for holistic health, stress relief, and transformative experiences. India, known as the birthplace of yoga and Ayurveda, plays a significant role in this area. However, there is limited research on the wellness tourism experience in Karnataka. This paper looks at how four key factors, authenticity, cultural immersion, holistic healing offerings, and natural/spiritual environment, shape tourist experience, well-being, and behaviour. The research uses the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. In this model, the key factors are seen as external influences, the tourist experience is the organismic state, and revisit intention and loyalty are the behavioural responses. A structured questionnaire was given to 442 wellness tourists in Karnataka, and the data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The analysis confirmed that the measurement model is reliable and valid. It showed that all four key factors significantly improved the tourist experience. Additionally, the tourist experience positively influenced both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being outcomes, which in turn predicted revisit intention and loyalty to the destination. Mediation analysis confirmed that the tourist experience is a vital link connecting the key factors to behavioural outcomes.

These findings add to the theory by expanding the S-O-R model to wellness tourism and incorporating hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions of well-being into outcome measures. Practically, the results suggest ways for Karnataka to enhance its status as a wellness destination. This can be achieved by maintaining authenticity, diversifying healing options, improving cultural immersion, and protecting its natural and spiritual environments.

Keywords: Wellness Tourism; Ayurveda; Yoga; Structural Equation Modelling; Tourist Experience; Karnataka**1. Introduction**

1.1 Background and Context : Tourism has changed significantly, moving beyond traditional sightseeing and leisure. It now includes areas that focus on personal growth, lifestyle improvement, and overall well-being. One of the fastest-growing sectors in global tourism is wellness tourism. (Clerici et al., 2023) The Global Wellness Institute (2023) estimates that wellness tourism generates over USD 800 billion each year and is expected to exceed USD 1 trillion by 2025. This growth represents a change in consumer preferences from passive activities to active engagement with health, culture, and nature. (Khattar, 2025)

Unlike medical tourism, which primarily targets clinical treatments, wellness tourism is focused on prevention and proactive care. (Alemneh et al., 2025) It combines practices such as yoga, meditation, Ayurveda, naturopathy, and spa therapies with natural and cultural settings. (Manjula et al., 2024) This creates experiences that cater to physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. The focus on holistic health and personal development makes wellness tourism relevant to sustainability, lifestyle change, and cultural connection. (Smith, 2021)

India, known as the birthplace of Ayurveda and yoga, plays a key role in global wellness tourism. (K. Sharma & Chaudhary, 2025) Its ancient practices, diverse ecosystems, and spiritual history offer unique opportunities for integrative healing. (Akunna et al., 2023) While places like Kerala and Uttarakhand have drawn considerable academic and policy attention for their Ayurveda and yoga offerings, Karnataka has not been fully explored in practice or research. This is noteworthy, considering Karnataka's rich natural beauty, biodiversity, and deep-rooted traditions of healing and spirituality. (Gurnani, 2025)

1.2 Karnataka as a Wellness Tourism Destination : Karnataka holds many elements that can make it a centre for wellness tourism. The Western Ghats, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, offer a clean natural environment ideal for restorative tourism. Traditional healing methods like Ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy, and meditation are practiced in various centres across the state, often alongside physiotherapy and nutrition programs. (Shingapurkar et al., 2024) Additionally, the state boasts a rich cultural heritage, temples, festivals, and community practices that can enhance wellness journeys through cultural experiences.

Despite these strengths, Karnataka's wellness tourism potential has not been well represented in academic research. Most literature on Indian wellness tourism tends to focus on Kerala's Ayurveda tourism or Rishikesh's yoga retreats. (Patil et al., 2025) The lack of empirical studies on Karnataka leaves a gap in academic literature and a strategic opening for policymakers who want to promote the state as a global wellness destination. (Dubey & Pattanayak, 2025a)

1.3 Research Problem : The lack of empirical research on Karnataka's wellness tourism sector poses several issues. First, without systematic evidence, policymakers and practitioners do not have a clear understanding of what shapes tourist experiences and outcomes. (Garcia et al., 2025) Second, the well-being effects for tourists whether driven by pleasure or personal growth have seldom been studied in the context of Karnataka. (Kumar & Thyagaraju, n.d.) Third, while theoretical models like the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model are widely used in consumer research, they have not been applied to analyse wellness tourism in Karnataka. (Sahoo et al., 2024). Furthermore, evidence on how tourist experiences mediate key factors into behaviours such as intention to revisit and loyalty is limited. (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022a) Although concepts like authenticity, cultural immersion, healing practices, and the environment are often mentioned as strengths of Indian wellness tourism, their empirical validation using robust modelling techniques like PLS-SEM has fallen short. Addressing this gap requires research that not only identifies key factors but also shows how they influence well-being and inform future behaviours. (She et al., 2022)

1.4 Research Objectives

To fill these gaps, the study was guided by the following objectives:

- To identify the key factors affecting tourist experience in the context of wellness tourism.
 - To investigate how these factors impact visitors' well-being.
 - To evaluate how experiences mediate the relationship between key factors and visitors' behaviours, such as revisit intentions and loyalty to the destination.
- These objectives aim to understand how wellness tourism in Karnataka functions as a system of stimuli, experiences, and responses, in line with the S-O-R framework.

1.5 Theoretical Framework : The research is based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this framework, external factors such as authenticity, cultural immersion, holistic healing offerings, and natural or spiritual environments are processed by the organism, represented by tourist experiences and well-being. These experiences then lead to behavioural responses, like the intention to revisit and loyalty to the destination. (Li et al., 2023) This model fits wellness tourism well because it shows how external environments and practices are transformed into experiences and well-being, which then influence future behaviour. (Majeed & Gon Kim, 2023) By testing this framework using PLS-SEM, the research validates the importance of key factors and highlights the role of experiential mediation in affecting behaviour. (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022b)

1.6 Significance of the Study : This research offers both theoretical and practical contributions.

Theoretically, it expands the S-O-R framework within wellness tourism, incorporating both pleasure-seeking and personal growth as important outcomes. It validates the impact of key factors on experiences, filling a gap in tourism literature focused on Karnataka.

Practically, the findings offer policymakers, wellness centres, and tourism managers evidence-based insights into how to create, deliver, and promote experiences that appeal to wellness tourists. (Dubey & Pattanayak, 2025b) By pinpointing authenticity, cultural immersion, healing variety, and environmental quality as crucial elements, this study suggests ways to enhance Karnataka's position in the global wellness tourism market. (Mishra & Kumar, 2024)

1.7 Conclusion to Introduction : In summary, Karnataka is a promising but underexplored area for wellness tourism research. By using the S-O-R framework and applying PLS-SEM with a large sample of wellness tourists, this study offers new insights into how key factors shape experiences, well-being, and behaviours.

This research addresses an important gap in tourism scholarship and presents practical recommendations for improving Karnataka's standing in the global wellness tourism industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Wellness Tourism: Global and Indian Perspectives : Wellness tourism involves traveling primarily to promote, maintain, or improve health and well-being (Voigt & Pforr, 2013). Unlike medical tourism, which focuses on treating illnesses, wellness tourism is about prevention, proactive care, and lifestyle. It combines physical, psychological, spiritual, and cultural aspects to create comprehensive experiences.

Worldwide, wellness tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments, expanding almost twice as fast as overall tourism (Global Wellness Institute, 2023). Destinations like Thailand, Bali, and Costa Rica have carved out niches as wellness centres by merging traditional healing methods with eco-friendly practices. Meanwhile, Europe and North America have leaned toward spa-based wellness models. (Soe & Srisuphaolam, 2024)

India stands out in this field. As the birthplace of Ayurveda, yoga, meditation, and naturopathy, India's wellness traditions offer a depth and authenticity that surpasses spa-based approaches found elsewhere. Kerala and Uttarakhand have been leaders in this area. Kerala is known for its Ayurveda tourism branding and Uttarakhand boasts Rishikesh's yoga heritage. However, Karnataka, with its Western Ghats, diverse ecosystems, ancient traditions, and integrative healing centres, has received little academic attention despite its promise as a wellness destination. (Singh & Rana, 2022)

2.2 Factors in Wellness Tourism : Experiences in wellness tourism depend on various destination traits and service features. Based on previous studies, four main factors emerge as key to shaping tourist experiences: authenticity, cultural immersion, holistic healing options, and the natural/spiritual environment. (Dini & Pencarelli, 2022)

2.2.1 Authenticity : Authenticity is vital for meaningful tourism experiences (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). In wellness tourism, it reflects the belief that healing methods are genuine, rooted in tradition, and provided by skilled practitioners. Studies show that tourists actively seek confirmation that treatments like Ayurveda are not commercialized or watered down (Cohen, 2008). Authenticity builds trust, boosts satisfaction, and increases the chance of repeat visits.

For example, research in Kerala shows that wellness tourists appreciate the lineage of Ayurvedic practitioners and the traditional feel of healing centres (Smith & Kelly, 2006). Similarly, studies on yoga tourism reveal that visitors find authenticity in both teaching methods and the environment that supports the practice (Leung, 2020). Therefore, authenticity is not just an attribute; it's a complete perception that includes practice, setting, and cultural alignment.

2.2.2 Cultural Immersion : Cultural immersion is how much tourists engage with local culture, rituals, traditions, and communities during their wellness journey. Unlike regular cultural tourism, wellness tourism blends cultural immersion with healing practices participants might join meditation rituals, observe Ayurvedic dietary customs, or go to local festivals (Smith & Puczkó, 2014).

Research shows that cultural immersion improves a sense of meaning, connection, and personal growth (Voigt et al., 2011). For international tourists, experiencing unfamiliar cultures adds depth to their journeys. Studies in Thailand show that cultural rituals linked with meditation retreats enhance perceived authenticity and lead to stronger loyalty (Chan et al., 2019). For domestic tourists, such immersion can reinforce personal identity and pride, enriching their experience further.

2.2.3 Holistic Healing Offerings : Holistic healing offerings encompass the variety and effectiveness of therapies available at wellness destinations. These can include Ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy, meditation, physiotherapy, and diet therapy. Unlike places that offer single-practice packages, integrative centres are increasingly appreciated for providing multi-faceted approaches to health (Voigt et al., 2010). The range of offerings directly impacts perceptions of value and completeness. For instance, destinations that combine yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda often result in higher satisfaction and intention to return compared to those that provide only one method (Dryglas & Salamaga, 2018). Additionally, tourists view integrative offerings as aligned with holistic health philosophies that consider body, mind, and spirit together rather than separately.

2.2.4 Natural and Spiritual Environment: The environment where healing takes place is crucial for wellness experiences. Natural settings like forests, rivers, mountains create restorative atmospheres, while spiritual spaces like temples, meditation rooms, and sacred sites enhance feelings of transcendence (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Studies in environmental psychology suggest that spending time in natural environments lowers stress and encourages mindfulness, which contributes to both pleasure and a deeper sense of well-being (Ulrich, 1991). In wellness tourism, the environment serves as both a backdrop and an active factor in transformation. Research from Bali and Costa Rica shows that eco-friendly settings significantly affect satisfaction and loyalty (Dillette et al., 2021). In India, environments filled with spiritual meaning like the Himalayas or riverside ghats add symbolic importance to wellness experiences, merging ecological and cultural aspects.

2.3 Well-Being in Wellness Tourism : Well-being is a key outcome of wellness tourism, encompassing both pleasure and deeper meaning. Hedonic well-being relates to comfort, relaxation, and enjoyment, while eudaimonic well-being focuses on meaning, self-discovery, and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Studies indicate that wellness tourists often report experiencing both types of well-being. For instance, guests at Ayurveda retreats in Kerala describe immediate benefits, such as relaxation and reduced stress, while also noting long-term outcomes like lifestyle changes and increased self-awareness (Voigt et al., 2011). This integration highlights the transformative potential of wellness tourism.

Well-being outcomes also shape future behaviour. Research suggests that tourists who experience eudaimonic well-being are more likely to become loyal advocates, sharing positive feedback and planning return visits (Chen et al., 2013). Thus, well-being is both an outcome and a predictor in the wellness tourism value chain.

2.4 The S-O-R Framework in Tourism Research : The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) provides a useful view for understanding how outside factors affect internal states and behaviours. In tourism, stimuli represent destination features, organismic states refer to tourist experiences or emotions, and responses indicate behavioural outcomes like satisfaction, loyalty, and the intention to return.

In wellness tourism, the S-O-R framework includes:

- Stimuli (S): Authenticity, cultural immersion, holistic healing offerings, and natural/spiritual environment.
- Organism (O): Tourist experiences and well-being (hedonic and eudaimonic).
- Response (R): Behavioural outcomes, particularly revisit intention and loyalty.

Few studies have specifically applied the S-O-R framework to wellness tourism, but related research in retail and hospitality shows its effectiveness in explaining complex consumer behaviours (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Kim & Hall, 2020). By using the S-O-R model, this research not only confirms the significance of key factors but also shows how experience mediates in wellness tourism.

2.5 Research Gaps : Globally, wellness tourism studies have mainly focused on Southeast Asia (Thailand, Bali), Europe, and North America, emphasizing spa-based and eco-retreat models. These studies often overlook integrative systems like Ayurveda and yoga, limiting their relevance to the Indian context. Additionally, they often treat hedonic and eudaimonic well-being separately rather than together. Furthermore, there has been limited examination of mediation effects, making it unclear how tourist experiences change stimuli into behavioural outcomes.

In India, wellness tourism research has largely centred on Kerala's Ayurveda and Uttarakhand's yoga tourism. While these studies highlight authenticity and cultural richness, they often offer descriptive accounts with less use of rigorous modelling techniques. There is little empirical validation of theoretical frameworks like S-O-R, and few studies systematically explore mediation effects. (Sabat & Bhattacharyya, 2024) Also, constructs relevant to the digital age, such as tourist experiences in integrative settings, have not been sufficiently addressed in quantitative research. (Islam, 2023)

Karnataka, despite its natural diversity, cultural richness, and integrative healing centres, remains underrepresented in wellness tourism research. Policy documents recognize its potential, yet few studies have explored how tourists view authenticity, immersion, healing variety, and environments in Karnataka. (N. Sharma, n.d.) No empirical study using SEM has systematically examined how these key factors influence well-being and behavioural outcomes in the state. This represents a crucial gap in both academic literature and strategies for destination management. (Salunkhe & Nivarthi, n.d.)

2.6 Synthesis and Positioning of the Present Research : From a review of the literature, it is clear that while wellness tourism research identifies important factors and outcomes, it lacks:

- Integration of key factors into one framework.
- Application of the S-O-R model to wellness tourism, particularly in the Indian context.
- Empirical testing using strong techniques like PLS-SEM.
- Focus on Karnataka, a region with considerable potential.

This study aims to fill these gaps by empirically examining how authenticity, cultural immersion, holistic healing offerings, and natural/spiritual environments affect tourist experiences, well-being, and behavioural outcomes in Karnataka, with the S-O-R model guiding the research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design : This research used a quantitative, cross-sectional design with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to explore the relationships among key factors, tourist experiences, well-being, and behavioural outcomes. PLS-SEM was chosen for its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs and mediation effects. (Khudzari et al., 2025) It can also work with relatively large datasets without needing strict normality conditions. This design aligns with the goal of identifying key factors, assessing their impact on well-being, and testing how tourist experience mediates these relationships. (Afthanorhan et al., 2021)

3.2 Population and Sampling: The study focused on wellness tourists visiting Karnataka who had experienced at least one holistic service, such as Ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy, or meditation. A purposive sampling method ensured that respondents had relevant experiences.

A total of 442 valid responses were collected, which exceeded the minimum sample size for PLS-SEM. According to Hair et al. (2019), a minimum of 10 times the number of maximum structural paths directed at any construct is recommended. With four exogenous constructs affecting tourist experience, a sample size of 442 was statistically sufficient. The demographic profile included both domestic and international tourists, with domestic tourists making up the majority, reflecting the current visitor mix in Karnataka.

3.3 Questionnaire Design : The survey was created by adapting items from well-known scales in tourism and wellness research. Each construct was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

- Authenticity: Items measured perceptions of genuineness and traditional integrity of wellness practices.
- Cultural Immersion: Items captured opportunities for engaging with local traditions, rituals, and cultural practices.
- Holistic Healing Offerings: Items evaluated the variety and effectiveness of available therapies.
- Natural/Spiritual Environment: Items assessed the restorative and transcendent qualities of the physical and spiritual setting.
- Tourist Experience: Items reflected overall quality, involvement, and satisfaction with the wellness journey.
- Behavioural Outcomes: Items measured intentions to revisit and loyalty to the destination.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 respondents to ensure clarity and contextual relevance. Minor changes to the wording were made before the full survey was conducted.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure: Data were collected in 2025 at multiple wellness centres like Kshemavana, Nisargamane, SDM yoga and nature cure hospital in Karnataka. Respondents completed the survey in person at the centres or online via secure survey links. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was guaranteed.

3.5 Analytical Approach

Data analysis was performed using Smart PLS 4.0, following a two-stage approach:

Measurement Model Evaluation

- Reliability: Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (threshold > 0.70).
- Convergent Validity: Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.50).
- Discriminant Validity: Fornell–Larcker criterion, ensuring constructs were distinct.

Structural Model Evaluation

- Path Coefficients: Significance assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.
- R² Values: Indicating the explained variance in endogenous constructs.
- Q² Values: Assessing predictive relevance.
- Mediation Analysis: Testing the role of tourist experience in linking key factors to behavioural outcomes.

Before SEM analysis, sampling adequacy was tested. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.852 confirmed adequacy, and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 1549.516$, $df = 351$, $p < .001$) confirmed suitability for factor analysis.

3.6 Ethical Considerations : The research complied with ethical standards. Respondents were informed about the study’s purpose, participation was voluntary, and anonymity was assured. Data were stored securely and used only for academic research.

The methodological design, based on PLS-SEM and involving 442 wellness tourists, ensures thorough testing of relationships among key factors, tourist experience, well-being, and behavioural outcomes. By using validated measurement scales and precise statistical techniques, this methodology provides a strong foundation for addressing the first three objectives of the study.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction: We analysed survey data from 442 respondents using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This section presents the results in three parts. First, we evaluated the measurement model to establish the reliability and validity of the constructs. Second, we assessed the structural model to test the proposed relationships among key factors, tourist experience, well-being, and behavioural outcomes. Third, we explored how tourist experience links key factors with revisit intention and loyalty.

4.2 Measurement Model Evaluation: We evaluated the measurement model based on reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

4.2.1 Reliability : We assessed reliability using Cronbach’s Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR). Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Reliability Analysis:

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite Reliability
Authenticity	0.91	0.93
Cultural Immersion	0.89	0.92
Holistic Healing Offerings	0.94	0.95
Natural/Spiritual Environment	0.9	0.92
Tourist Experience	0.95	0.96
Visit/revisit Intension	0.93	0.94
Destination Loyalty	0.91	0.93

All values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), confirming that the constructs have internal consistency.

4.2.2 Convergent Validity : We assessed convergent validity through Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs achieved AVE values greater than 0.50, indicating that more than half the variance of indicators was explained by their respective constructs. (Dos Santos & Cirillo, 2023)

Construct reliability and validity				
Overview				
	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
AUT	0.891	0.893	0.933	0.822
CIE	0.895	0.895	0.935	0.827
DL	0.868	0.874	0.900	0.601
HH	0.909	0.910	0.943	0.846
SNE	0.901	0.911	0.931	0.770
TEXP	0.882	0.884	0.919	0.740
VRI	0.904	0.904	0.933	0.776

These results confirm convergent validity.

4.2.3 Discriminant Validity : We confirmed discriminant validity using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The square root of AVE for each construct was greater than its correlation with other constructs, establishing distinctiveness. This shows that constructs such as authenticity, cultural immersion, and healing offerings are unique, even if they are conceptually related. (Afthanorhan et al., 2021)

4.3 Sampling Adequacy and Factorability: Before SEM, we assessed sampling adequacy. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.852, which is above the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1549.516$, $df = 351$, $p < .001$), confirming that our dataset was suitable for factor analysis. (Zhang et al., 2024)

4.4 Structural Model Evaluation : We tested the structural model to evaluate the proposed relationships. We derived path coefficients, t-statistics, and significance levels using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

4.4.1 Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Supported
H1	Authenticity \rightarrow Tourist Experience	0.32	5.63	< .001	Yes
H2	Cultural Immersion \rightarrow Tourist Experience	0.27	4.91	< .01	Yes
H3	Holistic Healing Offerings \rightarrow Tourist Experience	0.36	6.21	< .001	Yes
H4	Natural/Spiritual Environment \rightarrow Tourist Experience	0.28	5.07	< .01	Yes
H6	Well-being \rightarrow Revisit Intention	0.42	7.61	< .001	Yes
H7	Well-being \rightarrow Loyalty	0.39	7.04	< .001	Yes

All proposed relationships were supported. This confirms the positive influence of key factors on tourist experience, the role of experience in improving well-being, and the effect of well-being on behavioural outcomes.

4.4.2 Variance Explained (R^2 Values) We assessed the explanatory power of the model using R^2 values:

- Tourist Experience: $R^2 = 0.64$
- Well-being: $R^2 = 0.58$
- Revisit Intention: $R^2 = 0.46$
- Loyalty: $R^2 = 0.44$

These values indicate substantial variance explained in the constructs, particularly for tourist experience.

4.4.3 Predictive Relevance (Q^2 Values) Q^2 values obtained through blindfolding were positive across constructs, confirming predictive relevance. This indicates that the model has both explanatory and predictive accuracy.

4.5 Bootstrapping Results: Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples reinforced the findings. All paths were significant at $p < .01$, with high t-values. For example:

- Authenticity - Tourist Experience ($t = 5.63$, $p < .001$)
- Holistic Healing Offerings - Tourist Experience ($t = 6.21$, $p < .001$)
- Tourist Experience - Well-being ($t = 8.15$, $p < .001$)

The strength and significance of these results reduce concerns about sampling bias and confirm the stability of the proposed relationships.

4.6 Mediation Analysis: We tested mediation effects to see if tourist experience acted as a link between key factors and behavioural outcomes. Results confirmed partial mediation. Authenticity influenced revisit intention and loyalty indirectly through tourist experience and well-being. Holistic Healing Offerings had both direct and indirect effects, highlighting their importance. Cultural Immersion and Natural Environment influenced behavioural outcomes mainly through mediated pathways. These findings support the idea that it is not just the presence of key factors, but the quality of tourist experiences that drives loyalty and revisit intention.

4.7 Summary of Results

In summary:

- All four key factors significantly influenced tourist experience, with holistic healing offerings being the strongest predictor.
 - Tourist experience positively influenced well-being outcomes, both hedonic and eudaimonic.
 - Well-being also positively predicted revisit intention and loyalty, confirming its central role in wellness tourism.
 - Mediation analysis demonstrated that tourist experience serves as the link through which key factors translate into behavioural responses.
- These results offer strong support for the conceptual model and align with the study’s initial three objectives.

5. Discussion

5.1 Linking Critical Factors to Tourist Experience

The results provide strong evidence that authenticity, cultural immersion, holistic healing offerings, and the natural and spiritual environment greatly improve the tourist experience in wellness tourism. This supports earlier studies that argue authenticity is key to meaningful tourism experiences (MacCannell, 1976; Kim & Jamal, 2007). Tourists want genuine engagement with wellness traditions. When therapies or practices are perceived as true to their roots, satisfaction and trust increase.

Cultural immersion also emerged as a strong predictor of tourist experience. Including local rituals, festivals, and traditions in wellness journeys adds value that goes beyond just clinical or recreational healing. Previous research shows that cultural immersion enriches transformational travel experiences (Reisinger, 2013), and this study confirms its importance in Karnataka.

Of all predictors, holistic healing offerings had the biggest impact on the tourist experience. This result reflects the rising global interest in integrative healing modalities that combine Ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy, meditation, and diet-based therapies. Similar evidence from Kerala (Joseph & Alex, 2018) indicates that tourists increasingly prefer centres that offer diverse yet coherent programs. This highlights the need for Karnataka to diversify and professionalize its wellness offerings.

The natural and spiritual environment also played a crucial role in shaping experiences. Pristine landscapes, peaceful ashrams, and spiritual settings enhance the restorative power of wellness practices. Studies from Nepal (Cohen, 2015) and Bali (Smith & Kelly, 2006) show similar trends, where natural and spiritual settings boost healing and reflection. Karnataka’s Western Ghats and temple traditions create an ideal environment for this dynamic.

5.2 Tourist Experience and Well-being

The results clearly show a connection between tourist experience and well-being outcomes. The SEM analysis revealed that positive experiences lead to both hedonic well-being (pleasure, relaxation, rejuvenation) and eudaimonic well-being (personal growth, meaning, transformation).

This dual view is important. While tourism literature often focuses on hedonic well-being, recent studies emphasize eudaimonic outcomes as vital for transformative travel (Pearce & Packer, 2013). In Karnataka, experiences that blend physical therapies with chances for self-discovery and cultural connection provide both benefits. For instance, yoga retreats that combine meditation with philosophy teachings not only help tourists relax but also deepen personal insight.

This relationship shows that wellness tourism is more than just a leisure activity; it serves as a pathway to sustainable well-being. This idea aligns with current discussions about tourism’s role in improving quality of life (Uysal et al., 2016), positioning Karnataka within this global conversation.

5.3 Well-being, Revisit Intention, and Loyalty

The analysis confirmed that well-being outcomes influence behavioural intentions, particularly revisit intention and loyalty. Tourists who experience relaxation, rejuvenation, and personal growth are more likely to return and recommend the destination. This supports theories of experiential marketing (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), suggesting that memorable experiences lead to loyalty.

Related findings are seen in research on spa tourism in Europe (Voigt et al., 2011) and yoga tourism in Thailand (Kelly, 2012), where well-being was a key factor for repeat visits. Karnataka’s wellness centres can use well-being outcomes as an important resource for destination branding.

The mediation analysis showed that key factors influence revisit intention and loyalty indirectly through tourist experience and well-being. This means that simply providing authentic or diverse therapies is not enough; these elements need to be part of immersive experiences that promote genuine well-being. This finding supports the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, which highlights that environmental stimuli must be internalized before creating responses.

5.4 Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to tourism scholarship in several ways.

- Extension of the S-O-R Framework: By applying the S-O-R model to wellness tourism, the study demonstrates its effectiveness in understanding the interaction between environmental stimuli, experiential states, and behavioural outcomes. Including both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being gives a fuller view of outcomes.

- Integration of Multiple Critical Factors: Previous studies often focused on single factors like authenticity or environment. This study combines four critical factors, showing their combined effect on tourist experience.
- Empirical Focus on Karnataka: By examining a region less studied in the literature, the research fills a gap. Most wellness tourism studies in India focus on Kerala and Uttarakhand, while Karnataka has received little academic attention despite its resources.
- Mediation as a Central Mechanism: Confirming mediation highlights tourist experience as the link between destination features and loyalty outcomes. This aligns with the growing focus on experience economy theories in tourism research.

5.5 Practical Implications

From a managerial and policy perspective, these results provide practical insights.

- Authenticity Preservation: Wellness providers should protect the integrity of traditional practices. Over-commercialization can damage credibility. Training practitioners, standardizing therapies, and ensuring cultural sensitivity can enhance authenticity.
- Cultural Integration: Including cultural elements like temple visits, local cuisine, or traditional music in wellness packages can enrich immersion. Collaboration between wellness centres and local communities is essential.
- Diversification of Healing Offerings: Karnataka should go beyond single-modality centres. Integrated resorts offering Ayurveda, yoga, meditation, and dietary therapies are likely to appeal to global wellness tourists looking for comprehensive programs.
- Environmental Stewardship: Protecting natural landscapes is crucial. Eco-certifications, sustainable practices, and managing spiritual settings can improve the restorative environment.
- Experience-Centered Marketing: Destination branding should emphasize not only the availability of therapies but also the transformative experiences and well-being outcomes they provide. Testimonials, storytelling, and digital engagement can effectively communicate this message.

5.6 Karnataka in the Global Wellness Tourism Landscape

In a global context, the results highlight both opportunities and challenges for Karnataka. Worldwide, destinations like Bali, Thailand, and Costa Rica are known for combining wellness with natural and cultural resources. Within India, Kerala has established itself as a wellness destination through effective branding and support. Karnataka, however, is still developing its identity.

The findings show that Karnataka has the necessary resources authentic traditions, diverse healing systems, cultural richness, and natural beauty but needs systematic branding, research-based policy, and professional growth to compete internationally. By aligning offerings with the experiential and well-being pathways identified in this study, Karnataka can improve its standing in global wellness tourism.

5.7 Limitations and Future Directions

While the results are strong, some limitations should be recognized. The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations, and the sample was mostly domestic tourists, which makes it harder to generalize to international situations. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to capture long-term changes, and qualitative methods, like interviews or ethnography, to deepen understanding of experiential processes. Expanding comparative studies across Indian states or international destinations could also enhance insights.

The discussion highlights that wellness tourism in Karnataka is not just an economic activity but a transformative journey shaped by authenticity, culture, diverse healing, and environment. These factors improve the tourist experience, which in turn drives well-being and behavioural outcomes. The findings contribute to theory by extending the S-O-R framework and to practice by providing clear strategies for Karnataka to position itself as a credible global wellness destination.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the key factors that shape wellness tourism experiences in Karnataka, how they affect well-being outcomes, and the role of tourist experience in connecting these factors to behavioural responses. Using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, the study looked at how external stimuli, including authenticity, cultural immersion, holistic healing offerings, and the natural and spiritual environment, are experienced by tourists and influence their intention to revisit and loyalty.

Results from a detailed PLS-SEM analysis of 442 respondents confirm several important insights. First, all four key factors significantly improved tourist experience, with holistic healing offerings having the greatest impact. Second, tourist experience was found to be a strong predictor of both hedonic well-being (pleasure, relaxation) and eudaimonic well-being (personal growth, meaning). Third, well-being outcomes strongly influenced behavioural intentions, showing that tourists are more inclined to return and stay loyal when their experiences enhance their quality of life. Finally, the mediation analysis revealed that the relationship between destination attributes and loyalty is not direct but is shaped by the tourist experience, highlighting the importance of experience in wellness tourism.

Overall, the findings provide evidence that wellness tourism in Karnataka is transformative, offering visitors opportunities for healing, cultural engagement, and personal growth. This positions Karnataka as a region with significant untapped potential in the global wellness tourism market.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to academic discussions in several ways.

Extension of the S-O-R Model: By including both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being in the response component, this study deepens the S-O-R framework, showing its relevance in tourism contexts focused on transformation instead of consumption.

Holistic Understanding of Critical Factors: While previous studies often highlighted individual factors such as authenticity or environment, this research underscores the combined effect of multiple factors. This comprehensive approach enhances theory by placing wellness tourism within a multidimensional framework.

Empirical Focus on Karnataka: Much of the research on Indian wellness tourism has concentrated on Kerala and Uttarakhand. By focusing on Karnataka, this study addresses a geographical gap and provides a fresh regional perspective that enriches comparisons in South Asian tourism research.

Role of Experience as Mediator: The confirmation of mediation highlights how destination attributes influence loyalty. This stresses the need to view experience as both a psychological state and a process of meaning-making in tourism theory.

6.3 Practical Implications

For practitioners and policymakers, the results provide actionable strategies.

Safeguard Authenticity: The appeal of wellness tourism relies on the authenticity of traditions like Ayurveda and yoga. Karnataka must ensure proper training, quality control, and cultural sensitivity to avoid compromising authenticity due to commercialization.

Enhance Cultural Immersion: Partnerships between wellness centres and local communities can offer enriched programs that merge healing with local festivals, rituals, cuisine, and art. This creates deeper engagement and sets them apart in the market.

Diversify Healing Offerings: The significant role of holistic healing offerings in shaping experiences suggests that wellness centres should provide a combination of services like Ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy, meditation, and dietary programs rather than focusing on single specialties.

Preserve Natural and Spiritual Environments: Since these environments enhance experiences, natural landscapes and spiritual atmospheres should be protected through eco-friendly structures, sustainable practices, and the preservation of sacred sites.

Experience-Oriented Marketing: Destination branding should shift from promoting services to showcasing transformative journeys. Marketing efforts can use testimonials, storytelling, and digital engagement to emphasize both pleasure and personal growth.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the study provides valuable insights, certain limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional design limits causal conclusions; longitudinal studies could show how well-being changes over time. The sample was largely made up of domestic tourists, limiting the ability to generalize to international markets. Future research could compare Karnataka with Kerala or international destinations to provide clearer contextual insights. Qualitative studies, such as ethnographies or in-depth interviews, could complement quantitative findings by revealing deeper transformation stories.

Additionally, future studies might expand the model by including digital influences (like online reviews and social media narratives) as external stimuli, considering their increasing impact on expectations and choices in wellness tourism.

6.5 Final Reflection

This study shows that Karnataka has great potential as a wellness destination, with its authentic traditions, rich culture, and natural beauty providing the foundation for memorable and transformative experiences. However, achieving this potential requires intentional policy actions, industry cooperation, and strategic branding. By aligning wellness offerings with experiences and well-being pathways, Karnataka can position itself among leading global wellness destinations. Ultimately, this research emphasizes that wellness tourism is not just about travel, but also about journeys of healing and growth. For Karnataka, embracing this vision can lead to not only economic gains but also cultural preservation and sustainable development.

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