

Urban wellness: the space-out moment

Louisa Yee-Sum Lee, Kitty Yuk-Ching Lam and Margaret Y.C. Lam

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to advocate the emerging trend of wellness tourism in an urban setting. Cities, with dense population and hectic pace of living, pose some challenges on mental health to dwellers. Meanwhile, the populated characteristic of cities opens up opportunities for economic activity, in particular wellness tourism. To comply with the “travel to feel ‘well’” trend, product offerings and demand of wellness tourism in urban tourism destinations are yet to be enumerated. The trend paper offers research insights for future investigation.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The ideas presented in the trend paper are inspired by the personal observation of the author from both scholarly and grey literature.*

Findings – *The research directions are delineated in the supply and demand facets. In the demand side, the motivations and behaviors of wellness tourist exerted rooms for examination. Their experiences on wellness tourism could possibly extend to the long-term influence on the cognitive, affective and behavioral changes of individuals. From the supply perspective, the current demarcation of wellness tourism is yet to be explored. Intangible supply associated with wellness tourism, namely, event and dining experiences have been ignored in scholarly studies. A fresh review of the topic from socio-cultural perspective is also viable.*

Originality/value – *The rise of urbanization and visitor arrivals to cities is expected in foreseeable future. To the best of the author's knowledge, research insights on wellness tourism in the urban context are still at infancy. The insights on the trend paper are consolidated from a wide range of scholarly and grey literature in a holistic manner.*

Keywords Urban tourism, Consumer trends, Wellness tourism

Paper type Research paper

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The number of urban dwellers has been growing in recent decades. Half of the world's population lived in cities in 2012, while the figure will increase to six billion, or two-third of the entire world's population, by 2050 (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2013). Gruebner *et al.* (2017) denote that urbanization poses one of the major health-relevant changes to humanity in the upcoming decades. Living in cities is often associated with increased population density, traffic noise and pollution. Comparing to people living in the countryside, city dwellers are inclined to have depression and anxiety (Birch, 2015). With growing urbanization, increasing number of individuals is exposed to risk factors originating from living in the urban context, such as stress and stigma of mental health. Global Wellness Institute (2019) points to the global forces driving negative impacts on people's health and well-being. Deteriorating health, the feeling of loneliness, environmental degradation, the falling health systems in many countries and aging population bring opportunities to the anti-stress trend.

Tourism nowadays becomes an important element of modern lifestyle as people feel the need to travel. Cities, as places for people to live and work, began to emerge as major tourism destinations from the early twentieth century because of the variety of activities they offer (World Tourism Organization, 2012). The high levels of urbanization offer opportunities for many forms of economic activities, in which tourism plays a key role. As such, the opportunity for wellness tourism is stepping up

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in an urban context. Wide range of international events and tourism products advocate the awareness of mental health. In 2014, an international space-out competition, promoting the idea of enjoying free time in busy cities, was launched in South Korea ([Woopsyang Company, 2019](#)). Given its popularity in attracting thousands event-goers, the competition became an annual event and was held in various cities, such as Beijing, Hong Kong, Rotterdam, Suwon and Taipei, since then. Hotels featuring urban wellness are in rise. Numerous cultural and relaxation programmes, for example having resident Chinese doctor and offering Chinese medicinal dining experiences, were introduced and well received by consumers ([Clausing, 2019](#)).

The said examples point to the popularity of wellness tourism. Theoretically, wellness tourism is regarded as “the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey and residence by people whose main motive is to preserve or promote their health” ([Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001](#), p.7). On the demand side, wellness tourism covers comprehensive tourism products associated with physical fitness or beauty care, healthy nutrition or diet, relaxation, meditation, mental activity and illness prevention. According to the [Global Wellness Institute \(2018\)](#), wellness tourism grew from a US\$563bn market in 2015 to US\$639bn in 2017, which was twice as fast as the general tourism industry. The figure is expected to reach US\$919bn by 2022.

The subtle difference of consumers engaging in wellness tourism and those who are not is all about the motive. The former engages in such activity largely in virtue of preserving or promoting their health. Yet much of the research on tourism experiences has centered on motivations and satisfaction. Scholars ([Hobson and Dietrich, 1995](#); [McCabe and Johnson, 2013](#)), however, criticize that the stereotypical marketing representations of tourism downplay the significance and contribution of tourism to person’s well-being. Scholarly understanding on wellness tourism is still spardaic. Research on wellness tourism should go beyond the conventional understanding of escaping from stress or daily routine as travel motivation.

This trend paper proffers the following threads of research opportunities in the arena of wellness tourism. A sound analysis of the wellness industry, both the demand and supply perspectives, is necessary. In the demand side, consumers after wellness tourism are different from those consume the same product but merely for cure purpose ([Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001](#)). While the two segments can be hosted in the same tourism and hospitality establishments, their motivations, perceptions of service quality and pricing are likely of difference. In addition, urban theorists denote the intertwining urban tourism and everyday city life ([Frisch et al., 2019](#)). It presents an opportunity to extend the philosophical understanding of how the wellness tourism experiences extend to the cognitive, affective and conative aspects of people’s lives. Scholars ([Jennings et al., 2009](#); [McCabe and Johnson, 2013](#); [Uysal et al., 2016](#)) resonate with the view, as quality tourism experiences contribute to the long-term influence on the individualistic, psychological and social perspective of individuals. In addition, research opportunity in the demographic characteristics and behaviors of wellness tourists are abundant. Current understanding on wellness tourists, particularly in the Asian setting, is at infancy stage. Given the momentum of mobility and the rise of middle classes in Asia, such research endeavors is conducive in yielding practical insights.

In the supply side, few studies shed lights on the demarcation of wellness tourism. To comply with the “travel to feel well” trend, product offerings particularly in urban tourism destinations are yet to be enumerated. Cities are problematized in relation to health in the contemporary era and exhibited profound opportunities for wellness tourism. [Mueller and Kaufmann \(2001\)](#) researched the supply of wellness tourism provided by hotels in Switzerland. Sauna, solarium, sport, fitness, steam bath, swimming pool, Whirlpool, medical centre, healthy nutrition, massage, supervised sport, culture and relaxation are handful examples of well tourism offerings. Spirituality and yoga tourism has also been viewed as a growing subset of wellness tourism experiences

(Lehto *et al.*, 2006; Aggarwal *et al.*, 2008). The research gap falls into the investigation on wellness events, wellness dining and tourism establishment in addition to hotels. Furthermore, the crossover of cultural study in wellness tourism has yet to be explored. Chon (2019) coins the term Asian paradigm, featuring how hospitality has been developed in Asia because of the unique value and traditions. Such paradigm is also applicable to wellness tourism. Orientalism, such as the Chinese therapeutic art, the Japanese Zen experiences and the Ayurveda healing practices in India, emerges as a new arena for wellness tourism studies. A fresh review of wellness tourism from the socio-cultural perspective is conducive in suggesting theoretical and practical insights to create new business models and sustain the growth of the industry.

To conclude, wellness tourism burst into the consumer consciousness and will garner increasing attention to worldwide. Travel, by its intrinsic nature, enhances the hedonism of individuals. Tourism experiences associated with the pursuit of well-being indeed exhibit great potentials. Given the future trend of moving toward a wellness lifestyle, the discourse among entrepreneurs, investors, government and public would proliferate particularly in large cities and megacities. Scholarly endeavors on urban wellness are in demand in informing the wellness movement in the twenty-first century.

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