

The Perception of Wellness Tourism in Türkiye: A Comparison with European Countries

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Türkiye's potential in wellness tourism, a sector historically dominated by the Far East, South-east Asia, and Europe. Despite its geographical advantages, strong health and tourism sectors, affordable services, and rich cultural heritage, Türkiye remains underdeveloped in this field. To evaluate industry awareness and perception, the study analyzes insights from health tourism professionals. A total of 24 participants were reached, from both Türkiye and European countries. The participants were selected using snowball sampling to ensure that they included industry experts who are highly representative of the target population. The participants' perspectives were examined using the word association test, with the obtained data analyzed through word cloud and MAXQDA. The findings of the study reveal that the perception of wellness tourism is primarily shaped by health-related services, along with touristic offerings and the natural and cultural attributes of the destination. A comparison with successful European wellness markets highlights Türkiye's need to develop a unique wellness identity rooted in its cultural and historical traditions. The findings offer strategic recommendations to enhance Türkiye's destination brand equity and global competitiveness. The findings also provide valuable guidance for other developing nations aiming to establish themselves in the expanding wellness tourism sector.

KEYWORDS

Wellness Tourism, Spa, Traditional Medicine, Destination Competitiveness, Türkiye.

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1. Introduction

Faced with diseases throughout their history, humans have continuously sought ways to develop diverse treatment methods to preserve their health. Historical records reveal that treatment practices to heal both body and soul date back to ancient societies worldwide, from China to Africa and Europe. These early practices, discovered through observation and trial and error, and often relying on nature's resources, were then transmitted through subsequent generations (Öztürk et al., 2020). In the 18th and 19th centuries, clinical research became a cornerstone of medicine, whereby scientific data was used to evaluate treatments and provide concrete evidence of their efficacy. These advancements laid the groundwork for what is now recognized as modern, orthodox, or conventional medicine (Pasipoularides, 2014; Arpacı, 2021). As modern medicine rose to dominance, traditional treatment methods were often sidelined, with many dismissed as ineffective or even harmful (Yılmaz, 2020).

However, since the Second World War, modern medicine has faced increasing criticism for its reductionist approach, which often narrows its focus to the treatment of specific organ dysfunctions without adequately considering the broader social, psychological, and environmental factors that contribute to disease (Sayar, 2015). The redefinition of health by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948, as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" rather than merely the absence of disease or infirmity, further encouraged multidimensional approaches to well-being (WHO, 1948). This shift has become a catalyst for sustainable and integrative health practices (Osti & Goffi, 2021; Pereira et al., 2023). Recently, the limited time that healthcare professionals spend with patients, increasing concerns about the side effects and long-term risks of manufactured drugs, and the perception that natural treatments are safer and more sustainable have led to a revival of interest in traditional and holistic treatment methods (Tütüncü, 2017; Ünal & Dağdeviren, 2019). These developments have laid the groundwork for contemporary wellness movements.

Today, wellness stands in contrast to conventional medicine by focusing on lifestyle adjustments, preventive measures, and natural therapies (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Smith & Puczko, 2014). In affluent societies, longer life expectancy and active aging ideologies have made wellness consumption central to retirees' lifestyles (Johanson, 2004; Koskinen & Wilska, 2019). Furthermore, while wellness tourism has traditionally been driven by the 50-65-year-old age group, there is a growing trend of younger populations embracing wellness travel, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015; Tang et al., 2020). Businesses and governments have thus increasingly recognized the integration of health, relaxation, and personal well-being into travel experiences as a key growth area in tourism (Csirmaz & Pető, 2015). Türkiye's strong emphasis on modern medicine has overshadowed its rich cultural heritage and traditional healing practices, thereby limiting its appeal in the broader context of holistic wellness tourism. Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate Turkish and European experts' perceptions of Turkish wellness tourism. The findings reveal key differences in practices and strategies by comparing Türkiye's approach to that of European countries, which stand out for their success in wellness tourism. By highlighting these differences, the study seeks to show how emerging destinations can identify and leverage their unique resources for wellness tourism.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Wellness Tourism

Wellness is defined by the Global Wellness Institute (Global Wellness Institute [GWI], 2023a) as "the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health". The term itself may have originated from a blend of well-being and fitness (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015), or well-being and wholeness (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006). Wellness tourism refers to the common practice of people seeking traditional healing practices in locations away from their daily environments to rejuvenate and lead healthier lives (Kessler et al., 2020). Wellness tourism thus combines health-promoting activities with touristic products to meet the growing consumer demand for health-focused travel experiences (Johanson, 2004; Ergüven, 2010; Kessler et al., 2020). It is a modern concept, albeit with deep roots in traditional healing practices

from Eastern, Western, and Middle Eastern cultures, such as massage, yoga, herbal medicine, and bathing (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Koncul, 2012; Csirmaz & Pető, 2015).

The wellness industry now encompasses a wide range of areas, such as fitness, beauty, anti-aging nutrition, mind-body training, and weight loss, to offer services to a wide demographic (Smith & Puczkó, 2014; Koskinen & Wilska, 2019). These modern practices are often combined in a holistic approach with mystical and traditional therapies to achieve balance across all dimensions of life: physical, mental, psychological, and social well-being (Smith & Kelly, 2006; Milićević & Jovanović, 2015; Kessler et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2020). Practices are designed to enhance well-being through diverse services and experiences, including spa treatments and personal care, access to thermal water springs, practices like yoga, meditation, and healthy nutrition, opportunities for physical activity, and connection with nature (Johanson, 2004; Ergüven, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Smith & Puczkó, 2014; Santinha et al., 2015).

Wellness tourism spending reached \$720.4 billion in 2019 before declining in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic, the sector rebounded with an annual growth rate of 30.2%, surpassing the overall tourism growth rate of 23.8%. The market is expected to grow by an additional 52% by 2027 (GWI, 2023a). Wellness travelers contribute significantly to the tourism industry, with international wellness tourists spending 58% more than ordinary international tourists, and domestic wellness tourists spending 178% more than ordinary domestic tourists (Csirmaz & Pető, 2015; GWI, 2018; Kessler et al., 2020). North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific dominate the global wellness tourism market, with the United States, Germany, France, China, and Japan accounting for 64%, while Europe accounts for the most wellness trips regionally (GWI, 2023a).

2.2 Spas

Since ancient times, people have sought healing in thermal waters, frequently visiting thermal spas and baths to benefit from their therapeutic properties. For instance, Roman soldiers used public baths in conquered towns to heal and recuperate after extended military campaigns. Over time, the thermal bath culture flourished in Europe, where natural springs attracted visitors to places like Bath in England, Baden-Baden in Germany, and Piešťany in Slovakia. Hot spring destinations also emerged in the United States, Canada, and later in Asian countries like Japan and Korea (Tang et al., 2020). These baths, primarily focused on disease prevention, rehabilitation, and treatment, laid the foundation for the spa culture associated with wellness today.

The etymology of the word “spa” remains debated: some attribute it to the Latin abbreviation “sanitas per aquam”, meaning health through water (Papadopoulou, 2020), while others trace it to the Latin term “espa”, meaning fountain (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006). Following the two world wars, thermal bath sites were neglected, with many facilities falling into disrepair due to the decline of the upper-class nobility who had traditionally frequented spa towns. The rise of the middle class globally ended the era of class-exclusive access to thermal resorts, opening public baths to a broader demographic (Tang et al., 2020). In recent decades, renewed interest in holistic healing and natural remedies has sparked a revival of these once-forgotten spas, particularly among individuals in urban centers with high-stress professions, such as banking, finance, insurance, and information technology. What was once a luxury reserved for the elite has now become widely accessible, valued for its benefits in promoting longevity and enhancing quality of life (Smith & Kelly, 2006; Lordache et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2020).

Spas have adapted to meet the changing dynamics of the tourism market, transforming into comprehensive wellness facilities offering diverse services, such as relaxation, detoxification, weight management, smoking cessation programs, sports activities, social interactions, cultural events, and culinary experiences (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015). While spa services represent a significant aspect of the wellness movement, they are only one component of the broader concept of wellness. To gain a comprehensive understanding of wellness tourism, it is essential to explore other practices aimed at enhancing physical, mental, and social well-being. In particular, traditional, complementary, and alternative treatments should be reconsidered as integral elements of the wellness experience.

2.3 Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Therapies

The holistic approach to health, particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to a significant surge in consumer demand for traditional methods outside of modern medicine to maintain health, improve fitness, and address personal challenges like stress and depression (Pereira et al., 2023). Additionally, the global rise in interest in healthy and sustainable lifestyles has further driven the growing use of traditional and natural methods (Osti & Goffi, 2021; Yu & Watson, 2024). WHO categorizes these practices, which have origins spanning thousands of years, as traditional and complementary medicine. According to WHO (2019), traditional and complementary medicine comprises “a set of knowledge, skills, and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences specific to different cultures, which may or may not be explained, used to prevent, diagnose, cure, or treat physical and mental diseases, as well as to maintain good health”. These treatments encompass methods that are either alternative or complementary to conventional medicine. Examples include yoga, acupuncture, massage therapies, hypnotherapy, Ayurvedic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, tai chi, homeopathy, naturopathy, and functional medicine (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health [NIH], 2021). Complementary therapies, such as acupuncture, are often used alongside conventional medicine to mitigate side effects; while alternative medicine can replace conventional treatments with traditional approaches, such as special diets prescribed instead of medications (NIH, 2021; NIH, 2024).

In its focus on the prevention of potential health issues and the promotion of overall well-being through proactive measures, wellness tourism primarily caters to individuals who are already healthy. It emphasizes improvements in lifestyle, including fitness, nutrition, relaxation, and traditional treatments (Tang et al., 2020). In contrast, medical tourism serves individuals seeking urgent or non-emergency treatments, such as surgeries, cancer therapies, dental care, and cosmetic procedures, for specific health conditions (Connell, 2006; Bookman & Bookman, 2007; Hunter, 2007; Smith & Puczko, 2014; Otamiş & Yüzbaşıoğlu, 2015). A critical distinction lies in motivations and approaches: medical tourism is reactive, addressing existing health concerns, whereas wellness tourism is proactive, focusing on maintaining health and preventing illness. Wellness tourists voluntarily visit facilities for well-being enhancement, undergoing expert evaluations to tailor services to their needs. In contrast, medical tourists typically pursue mandatory treatments. GWI (2024) emphasizes this contrast by defining medical tourism as reactive and wellness tourism as proactive, thereby underscoring their distinct purposes and contributions to health-focused travel. Despite their distinct characteristics, wellness and medical tourism are both widely acknowledged as sub-categories within the broader domain of health tourism (Martins et al., 2023). In practice, the boundaries between these two forms of tourism often overlap, as individuals may integrate wellness practices with medical treatments during their travels, typically under professional guidance (Puczko & Bachvarov, 2006).

Consequently, wellness tourism has emerged as a sector where traditional healing methods, essential for physical, psychological, emotional, environmental, and social well-being and renewal, are reimagined and offered in a modern context (Kessler et al., 2020; Antunes et al., 2022). Destinations incorporate traditional treatments into these offerings to enhance the overall experience by providing wellness tourists with highly comprehensive service packages including services like fitness, beauty treatments, healthy nutrition, meditation, rehabilitation, and spa therapies, all delivered under the supervision of health professionals (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015).

2.4 Wellness Tourism in Europe

In the late 1980s and 1990s, wellness tourism destinations were primarily located in Southeast Asia. However, in recent years, European countries have been gaining popularity, with Europe becoming a major hub, characterized by many inbound and outbound wellness tourists, significant wellness tourism spending, and a comprehensive wellness tourism supply (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001; Koncul, 2012; Tang et al., 2020). The term “wellness” is now widely used across European countries (Tang et al., 2020). Many accommodation establishments position themselves as revitalizing retreats, describing themselves as wellness centers, wellness hotels, and wellness resorts to reflect a holistic approach to body, mind, and spirit (Chen et al., 2008). In Europe, where human well-being is viewed holistically (Ergüven, 2010), wellness services are tailored to reflect this philosophy. The provision of high-quality, luxurious services is a crucial compet-

itive element (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001; Kessler et al., 2020). However, the concept of wellness services can vary significantly from region to region (Kessler et al., 2020).

In many Central and Eastern European countries, wellness practices are predominantly spa-based, utilizing healing thermal waters. Countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia have made significant investments in traditional medical resorts. In Poland and Bulgaria, natural treatments are state-approved and categorized under therapeutic services, holistic health services, and alternative health services. In Southern and Western Europe, wellness methods often include sun exposure, sea air, the Mediterranean diet, outdoor activities, and thalassotherapy. Conversely, Northern Europe, with its limited natural healing resources, focuses more on relaxation activities, such as massages, saunas, and baths. Scandinavian countries, however, offer lakeside activities like walking, skiing, and swimming, even in winter (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Smith & Puczkó, 2009; Milićević & Jovanović, 2015).

Slovenia excels in health-themed resorts and spas, where all spas are part of the public health system. These facilities offer balneotherapy, physiotherapy, and a variety of modern wellness services. Traditional practices rooted in Eastern wisdom, such as shiatsu, reiki, Ayurveda, sawadee, watsu, scen tao, and hot stone massages, are provided exclusively by trained and certified professionals (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015). Finland and Estonia are also prominent spa destinations. Finnish spas combine wellness services with relaxation and entertainment to promote healthy lifestyles. Estonia, with its rich history in wellness services, attracts visitors with traditional spa therapies and medical treatments (Koskinen & Wilska, 2019).

Germany leads Europe in the number of wellness tourists, with Baden-Baden spas being key attractions. Southern Germany is renowned for its luxury wellness hotels, while Kneipp Therapy—involving hot and cold water applications—is a notable traditional practice (Ergüven, 2010). On the other hand, European countries not only attract international wellness tourists but also maintain vibrant domestic wellness tourism activities (Chen et al., 2008). Italy, being the second most popular wellness destination in Europe, primarily attracts tourists from Northern European countries like Austria, Switzerland, France, and Germany. Hungary's wellness tourism is defined by traditional baths, Turkish and Roman influences, natural treatments, diet centers, thermal waters, beauty treatments, eco and rural tourism, and sports activities (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015). Austria, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Switzerland, and France also offer competitive wellness opportunities (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Koncul, 2012). The south of France has been a favored destination for Northern Europeans since the 18th and 19th centuries (Smith & Kelly, 2006; Lordache et al., 2013).

Spas that integrate traditional and complementary wellness practices are key businesses in European wellness tourism (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Papadopoulou, 2020). Organizations like Europe SPA (europespa.eu), the European SPAS Association (europeanspas.eu), and TÜV Rheinland (tuv.com) play vital roles in maintaining service quality through quality management and accreditation services. To meet modern tourists' demands and remain competitive in the global market, Europe offers a diverse range of wellness options, complemented by quality accommodation, gastronomic offerings, sports, entertainment, and cultural activities (Milićević & Jovanović, 2015). While luxury hotels are significant players in the wellness tourism sector, modest service businesses also thrive. The European wellness tourism industry is also dynamic, continually developing new wellness products and enhancing service standards to cater to a diverse clientele (Koncul, 2012).

2.5 An Overview of Turkish Wellness Tourism

Türkiye dominates the global health tourism industry with a 19.5% revenue share (Grand View Research, n.d.), attracting 1.2 million health tourists in 2022, who generated \$2.1 billion in health tourism revenue (USHAŞ, 2024). These figures highlight Türkiye's strong position in modern medical practices and its success as a global health tourism hub. The most sought-after specialisms among international patients include gynecology, internal medicine, medical biochemistry, aesthetics, general surgery, orthodontics, orthopedics, traumatology, infectious diseases, and ear, nose, and throat (Bilgiçli, 2024).

Türkiye's health tourism sector began its significant advance towards its current position after it was prioritized in state development plans. The Ministry of Economy introduced incentives for health tourism in 2015, followed by the publication of the Regulation on International Health Tourism and Tourist Health

in 2017 (Türkiye Official Gazette, 2017). This regulation established minimum service delivery standards for health tourism by authorizing various institutions, including hospitals, medical centers, clinics, polyclinics, dental health centers, travel agencies, and physical therapy and rehabilitation centers.

A further milestone came with the 2018 Regulation on Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation Centers in Türkiye, which granted accommodation facilities authorization to operate as wellness-focused centers (Türkiye Official Gazette, 2018). These centers integrate modern, traditional, and complementary medical services, often utilizing thermal waters (Sertgöz & Uymaz, 2022). In addition to medical treatments, they offer various wellness services, such as beauty therapies, healthy nutrition programs, and outdoor activities (Yılmaz & Güneren, 2024). This development represents an important step in shaping Türkiye's wellness tourism sector. However, the strong emphasis on modern medical practices has, to some extent, overshadowed the country's rich traditional healing methods rooted in Anatolian cultural heritage, thereby limiting its appeal in the broader landscape of holistic wellness.

Anatolia, often referred to as the "cradle of civilization", has long been a cultural crossroads due to its strategic location between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. This unique position has fostered the blending and coexistence of diverse traditions, beliefs, and practices over thousands of years. Türkiye, situated on Anatolia, embodies this rich cultural heritage, shaped by influences from shamanistic traditions, Greek and Roman mythology, and the customs of numerous civilizations. With the Turks' adoption of Islam, these traditions became even more diverse, integrating local customs with Islamic influences to form a multifaceted approach to health and healing.

Delving further into history, Ancient Anatolia was home to monumental health structures dedicated to Asclepius and other deities, where healing practices were closely tied to sacred spring waters. Patients bathed in mineral-rich waters as part of their treatment, alongside other therapeutic methods. The Asklepion of Bergama in İzmir, renowned for its healing waters and clean air, emerged as a key center of Anatolian temple medicine (Casson, 1974; Tuna & Özer, 2015). In Roman culture, psychotherapy and hydrotherapy played vital roles in treating obstetric, dermatological, and rheumatic diseases. Asklepion's physicians, known as Asclepiads, were regarded as descendants of Asclepius, with notable figures including Hippocrates, Galen, and Claudius. Treatments in these temples encompassed *istikhara* sleep therapy, water sound therapy, mud cures, healing waters, cupping, fasting, and music therapy (Kuşkonmaz, 2016; Turkish Culture Portal, 2021).

From the 10th to the 20th century, Turkish physicians extensively used music therapy to treat psychological disorders, drawing on the works of scholars like Razi, Farabi, and İbn-i Sina (Hatunoğlu, 2019). Treatments involved selecting melodies based on a patient's pulse and emotional state, often incorporating natural sounds like flowing water and birdsong for therapeutic purposes (Ergüven & Yılmaz, 2017). Additionally, Turkish musical traditions associated specific modes (*maqams*) with zodiac signs that influenced treatment choices—for example, *Rehavi Maqam* for headaches in Libras or *Rast Maqam* for paralysis in Aries (Şengül, 2014). Today, Türkiye legally recognizes various traditional treatments, including phytotherapy, chiropractic care, ozone therapy, mesotherapy, acupuncture, homeopathy, and music therapy. However, despite its historical significance, music therapy is not currently practiced in the country (Yılmaz & Güneren, 2024).

Meanwhile, the GWI's Wellness Geography Report (2023b) highlights European wellness destinations for their diverse offerings, such as saunas, mountaineering, climate therapy, and thalassotherapy. In contrast, Türkiye's wellness tourism reputation remains largely tied to Turkish baths, underscoring the country's underutilized potential. To fully capitalize on its rich wellness heritage, Türkiye must rediscover and integrate its traditional healing resources into modern wellness tourism. The present study addresses this need by exploring the development of a unique Turkish wellness model. It first assesses the perception of wellness tourism in Türkiye and then compares it to European countries, where similar services have gained greater success through more effective marketing strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Instrument and Procedure

In this study, the Word Association Test (WAT), a qualitative research method, was used to explore participants' perspectives on wellness tourism. WAT, widely applied across various fields to assess conceptual perceptions (Pranoto & Afrilita, 2018), has also been frequently used in tourism research (Karakuş et al., 2020; Ye & Jeon, 2020; Çetin & Bora, 2022; Gürbüz & Özer, 2022; Doğan & Onat, 2024).

To conduct the WAT, participants were provided with the keyword "wellness tourism" and asked to list 10 words or phrases that came to mind. To facilitate this, they were given semi-structured forms with "wellness tourism" written 10 times in one column, while they were instructed to write their responses next to each occurrence of the term. The keyword was written ten times vertically to minimize the risk of chain responses, which arises when participants base their subsequent answers on their previous responses instead of focusing on the given keyword each time (Yiğit & Kiyıcı, 2019; Karakuş et al., 2020).

Another key aspect of the method was ensuring spontaneity in the responses. After the study's objectives were briefly explained, participants were given a short period—approximately 30 seconds—to write down their immediate associations with wellness tourism. No additional information about the concept was provided beforehand. This approach allowed for an assessment of participants' existing perceptions of wellness tourism without any prior influence or preparation.

Afterward, the most frequently mentioned expressions related to wellness tourism were identified and organized using a word cloud, which visually represents the most commonly used words in a text, thereby helping to highlight key themes (Atenstaedt, 2012). This method enhances the understanding of words and concepts by displaying them in a visually engaging format (Karademir & Sivuk, 2023). The word cloud was generated using an online tool (wordclouds.com).

The obtained data were also systematically coded using the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis program. The program, offering researchers many opportunities for data coding and visualization, is frequently used in tourism studies (Demirel et al., 2022; Ferreira & Fernandes, 2023). Using MAXQDA's two-cases model, two document groups were compared in terms of frequencies (maxqda.com). Subsequently, the data were examined in detail, and main themes of wellness tourism were identified based on the literature.

3.2 Sample

Twenty-four sector representatives and academicians from Türkiye and Europe were interviewed either face to face or online. Using the WAT, participants were asked to list the words or expressions that came to mind when they thought of wellness tourism within the given time frame. Participants were selected through snowball sampling to ensure that the sample consisted of industry experts and academics who were highly representative of the target population.

4. Findings

4.1 Demographic Findings

Twelve experienced representatives in health tourism from various European countries were reached. The participants included academicians specializing in health tourism, particularly wellness tourism, as well as managers of accommodation businesses, intermediary institutions, and organizations operating in this sector.

Table 1. European Country Participants

n	Profession	Country	Work experience (years)
1	Tourism academic	Hungary	12
2	Tourism academic	Hungary	24
3	Tourism academic	UK	20
4	Travel agency manager	Bulgaria	10
5	Tourism business manager	Italy	20
6	Tourism business manager	Serbia	23
7	Tourism chief executive officer	Germany	35
8	Health tourism expert	Croatia	10
9	Health tourism consultant	Netherlands	20
10	Medical tourism facilitator	Sweden	18
11	Health tourism consultant	Austria	40
12	Tourism academic	Netherlands	22

Source: Survey's Data

As shown in Table 1, all participants have at least 10 years of experience in health tourism. The academics interviewed were researchers and educators specializing in health tourism, particularly wellness tourism, in various European countries. Participants identified as tourism business managers in the table included owners and managers of accommodation establishments offering thermal, spa, and wellness services. The health tourism consultants or facilitators were professionals connecting health tourists with service providers in the sector. These participants also play a significant role in shaping international health tourism by supporting health tourism facilities in gaining accreditation, guiding global health tourism initiatives, participating as panelists, and participating in industry trade fairs.

Table 2. Türkiye Participants

n	Profession	Work experience (years)
1	Hotel manager	12
2	Tourism academic	24
3	Health tourism consultant	20
4	Health tourism expert	10
5	Health tourism expert	20
6	Hotel business manager	23
7	Health tourism expert	35
8	Medical doctor	10
9	Hotel business manager	20
10	Tourism business manager	18
11	Hotel manager	40
12	Medical doctor	22

Source: Survey's Data

Table 2 lists the 12 health tourism experts reached in Türkiye. As well as academics, the participants included dentists and medical doctors providing medical tourism services in Türkiye.

Those identified as consultants are managers of organizations overseeing authorization certification for health tourism businesses, organizing panels, and supporting trade fair events. Hotel owners and managers holding a health tourism authorization certificate and a license for accommodation-based physical therapy and rehabilitation centers were also interviewed to draw on their potential high awareness of wellness tourism. However, only one senior hotel manager of these centers contributed to the study. The remaining business representatives were owners and managers of five-star hotels offering spa services.

Although one academic specializing in wellness tourism in Türkiye was included, efforts to directly reach a wellness tourism sector representative were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the study successfully captured the perspectives of representatives from various segments of Türkiye's health tourism sector regarding wellness tourism.

4.2 Word Clouds

Although word clouds are increasingly used as a simple tool to identify key themes in written material, they have certain limitations. One of the most common issues is variation in how participants express similar concepts, including differences in spelling, special characters, or slight wording variations. For example, the method may fail to group terms with the same or similar meanings, such as "Covid-19" and "Covid 19" or "analysis" and "analyses" (Atenstaedt, 2012).

To address this limitation in the present study, words were first analyzed individually and then standardized to ensure consistency (Karademir & Sivuk, 2023). For instance, expressions like "healthy" and "good for health" were grouped under the label "healthy", while "relax" and "relaxation" were grouped under the label "relaxation". This process yielded 113 expressions from the European participants and 117 from the Turkish participants, with some entries containing missing or incomplete words.

The refined word list, related to the concept of wellness tourism, was then used to generate word clouds, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Additionally, the most frequently mentioned expressions were compiled into word lists (Tables 3 and 4).

Figure 1 presents a word cloud for the expressions that participants from European countries associate with the concept of wellness tourism, while Table 3 lists in order of frequency the expressions that appeared at least three times in the participants' responses and were prominent in the word cloud.

Figure 1. Word Cloud for European Participants



Source: Survey's Data

As seen in Figure 1, health is naturally at the core of wellness tourism perceptions in Europe. This aligns with the findings of Smith & Puczkó (2014), which indicate that all spa and wellness customers maintain a strong commitment to health in their daily lives. The prominence of this concept is confirmed by its po-

sition in Table 3. Another key concept in the word cloud is relaxation, reflecting that Europe’s spas have fostered a wellness culture centered on relaxation, self-care, and luxury services since the 19th century (Papadopoulou, 2020).

The European approach to wellness, which has evolved from spa traditions and embraces a holistic view of health (Ergüven, 2010; Saari, 2023), is once again reflected in these findings. Hence, it is unsurprising that concepts like spa, yoga, massage, trekking, pleasure, holistic, nature, regeneration, and treatment are prominent themes.

Table 3. Most Frequent Expressions about Wellness Tourism by European Participants

Expression	Frequency	Expression	Frequency
health	10	holistic	3
relaxation	7	trekking	3
good food	5	pleasure	3
yoga	4	healthy diet	3
massage	4	treatment	3
regeneration	4	nature	3
spa	4		

Source: Survey’s Data

In summary, the results for the European participants confirm that spa culture remains central to European wellness services, while traditional Asian practices such as yoga and meditation are also widely embraced (Puczko & Bachvarov, 2006; Smith & Puczko, 2009; Milićević & Jovanović, 2015). Additionally, the frequent mention of expressions like diet and good food indicates that food and beverage services play significant roles in European wellness tourism. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that high-quality, healthy, and locally sourced food are key components of wellness tourism (Ali & Ali, 2020; Saari, 2023; Yu & Watson, 2024).

Figure 2. Word Cloud for Turkish Participants



Source: Survey’s Data

Figure 2 presents the word cloud for the Turkish participants’ responses regarding wellness tourism in Türkiye. As with the European participants, health is the central concept associated with wellness. Although the term wellness tourism can be translated into Turkish as “healthy life tourism”, its usage re-

mains limited (Avcı & Şener, 2023). Nevertheless, it is evident that wellness tourism is strongly linked to health and well-being in both Europe and Türkiye.

As shown in Table 4, the key concepts that Turkish participants associate with wellness tourism include peace, spa, fitness, relaxation, massage, meditation, healthy nutrition, beauty, nature, yoga, and treatment. These findings suggest that expert perceptions of wellness tourism in Türkiye align closely with those of Europeans.

However, Turkish participants more frequently mentioned water, thermal, and tourism. This difference aligns with the existing literature on wellness tourism in Türkiye, which predominantly focuses on thermal tourism and thermal hotels (Kozak, 1992; Boyraz, 2019; Şengül & Bulut, 2019).

Table 4. Most Frequent Expressions about Wellness Tourism in Türkiye by Turkish Participants

Expression	Frequency	Expression	Frequency
health	8	healthy nutrition	4
peace	7	nature	4
spa	6	treatment	3
fitness	5	beauty	3
relaxation	5	yoga	3
water	5	thermal	3
massage	4	tourism	3

Source: Survey's Data

Türkiye ranks first in Europe in geothermal resources and third in spa applications. The prominence of Turkish baths on the GWI's map of global wellness tourism resources (GWI, 2023b) further reinforces the perception that wellness practices in Türkiye are strongly associated with water. While this perception aligns with the definition and scope of wellness tourism, it also indicates that Türkiye's wellness tourism sector is largely concentrated in services provided by thermal and spa hotels, as well as hamams (Turkish baths) within hotel spa facilities.

Additionally, many spas in Türkiye offer a variety of wellness services, including Far Eastern-origin massage therapies and internationally recognized treatments such as aromatherapy, vitamin cures, and ozone therapy (Aytekin et al., 2023; Yılmaz & Güneren, 2024). While these offerings suggest that the wellness tourism sector has developed in Türkiye, studies indicate that awareness among sector representatives regarding wellness tourism or healthy life tourism remains low (Siner & Torun, 2020; Armağan et al., 2023).

As a result, wellness practices in Türkiye appear to be less developed than those in countries known for their holistic wellness approaches. Notably, fitness and meditation were mentioned more frequently by the sector experts in Türkiye than their counterparts in Europe and are among the first expressions that come to mind when discussing wellness tourism in Türkiye.

The Turkish participants' frequent mentions of yoga and meditation—practices primarily associated with the Far East and Southeast Asia—are particularly intriguing. This trend may suggest that wellness is still perceived in Türkiye as a concept rooted in other cultures, rather than one that incorporates the country's own unique wellness traditions. This could indicate that Türkiye has yet to fully explore and promote its indigenous wellness resources.

4.3 Themes and Concepts in MAXQDA Two-cases Model

MAXQDA is a software for qualitative analysis that assists researchers in analyzing all types of data, such as interviews, focus groups, articles, and media. By systematically evaluating texts, the words and phrases can be counted (Marjaei et al., 2019). In the present study, a two-case analysis was conducted using MAXQDA to compare the results of Türkiye and European countries.

In MAXQDA, related expressions are grouped under predefined themes for data categorization. This is called thematic analysis (Sağlam & Kanadlı, 2021). Accordingly, in the present study, content-related expressions concerning wellness tourism were identified and systematically categorized using thematically appropriate categories based on the existing literature. Two academics independently reviewed the identified themes and re-evaluated the consistency and relationship between the data and the themes. They confirmed correspondence between the themes and the categorized expression groups, thereby increasing the findings’ validity and reliability. Four main themes were identified, and relevant concepts were systematically coded under them using MAXQDA, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Themes and Concepts Related to Wellness Tourism

Theme	Concept
Health-related services	This theme refers to services and activities aimed at enhancing individuals’ physical and mental well-being, such as health, yoga, massage, regeneration, healthy diet, treatment, holistic practices, fitness, healthy nutrition, and beauty.
Natural environments	This theme refers to nature-based experiences and resources, such as relaxation, spa, trekking, pleasure, peace, meditation, thermal environments, and water.
Tourism-related services	This theme refers to tourism-related services that enrich travel and accommodation experiences, such as relaxation, good food, pleasure, and peace.
Cultural heritage resources	This theme refers to health-related practices that are historically and/or culturally significant, such as yoga, meditation, and massage.

Source: Survey’s Data

As shown in Table 5, wellness tourism extends beyond health and tourism services to encompass significant natural and cultural dimensions. The literature supports this multidimensional understanding, indicating that wellness tourism is fundamentally structured around health-related services, tourism services, natural environments, and cultural heritage resources (Johanson, 2004; Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Smith & Puczkó, 2014; Santinha et al., 2015; Koskinen & Wilska, 2019; Kessler et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2020).

The four themes provided a coding framework for the subsequent categorization process. Concepts such as health and treatment were directly categorized under the health-related services theme, while terms like thermal environments and water were included under the natural resources theme. However, certain concepts were associated with more than one theme. For instance, massage was coded under both health-related services and cultural heritage resources, while relaxation could reflect either a tourism service—such as a stay in a peaceful hotel—or a nature-based experience. Consequently, some expressions were assigned to multiple themes, resulting in overlapping codes. This overlap led to differences in the frequency counts compared to those generated in the word cloud analysis. Figure 3 displays the thematic frequency comparison between Türkiye and Europe, generated through the two-case model in MAXQDA.

Figure 3. Comparative Analysis of Thematic Frequencies in Wellness Tourism between Türkiye and Europe



Source: Survey’s Data

Figure 3 displays the two data sets from Türkiye and Europe, shown by document icons on the left and right, with the central section representing the total frequencies of the identified themes and associated concepts. In line with the word cloud results, the health-related services theme was the most prominent aspect of wellness tourism, mentioned 50 times by Turkish participants and 56 times by European participants, making it the most frequently cited theme overall (106 occurrences).

The natural environment theme ranked first in Türkiye and second in Europe. Its frequency in Türkiye was slightly higher than that for health-related services, reflecting a shared understanding in Türkiye that wellness tourism is inseparable from natural elements, consistent with the role of nature in traditional and complementary therapies (Kaya & Yılmaz, 2020). In Europe, nature was clearly mentioned less frequently than health.

The tourism-related services theme shows similar frequencies in Türkiye (39) and Europe (40). Its lower prominence in Türkiye, following health and nature, suggests that wellness tourism has yet to be fully integrated into the country's tourism sector, reflecting a gap in perception and practice (Siner & Torun, 2020; Armağan et al., 2023). In contrast, its equal emphasis alongside natural environments in Europe points to a more advanced integration of wellness practices within the tourism industry.

Despite higher overall awareness of wellness tourism in Europe, cultural heritage resources were the least cited theme in both regions. This is notable given that wellness tourism is rooted in traditional healing practices from Eastern, Western, and Middle Eastern cultures, such as massage, yoga, herbal medicine, and bath culture (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006; Koncul, 2012; Csirmaz & Pető, 2015). These findings reflect shared global trends while also highlighting the need for both Türkiye and Europe to revisit their traditional healing practices and expand the definition of wellness tourism beyond commonly cited practices like massage, yoga, and baths. Table 6 presents the total frequencies and percentages of each theme in Türkiye and Europe.

Table 6. Total Frequencies and Percentages of Themes in Türkiye and Europe

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Health-related services	106	33,87
Natural environments	90	28,75
Tourism-related services	79	25,24
Cultural heritage resources	38	12,14
Total	313	100

Source: Survey's Data

Table 6 enables a general interpretation of the key components of wellness tourism based on responses from both groups. The findings indicate that health-related services constitute the most prominent component of wellness tourism, followed by the natural features of the destination and tourism-related services. Notably, in both the Türkiye and European cases, cultural elements of modern wellness tourism are comparatively less emphasized relative to other components.

5. Conclusion

Globally, wellness tourism is gaining momentum due to increasing awareness of sustainability and health-conscious lifestyles. Studies show that international wellness tourists are particularly drawn to treatments rooted in local traditions (Ali & Ali, 2020; Osti & Goffi, 2021; Yu & Watson, 2024). A successful wellness tourism experience depends on having a suitable natural environment and a comprehensive range of services, including healthcare, transportation, accommodation, dining, shopping, excursions, and recreational activities (GWI, 2018; Saari, 2023). These insights highlight the inherently interconnected structure of the health and tourism sectors, with natural and cultural assets forming essential dimensions of wellness tourism. Therefore, the effective development and management of this sector necessitate a

holistic approach that takes all these interrelated factors into account. Many European countries, such as Belgium, Bulgaria, and Slovenia, have already implemented professional standards in wellness services, thereby enhancing both customer satisfaction and competitive positioning (Kuşluvan et al., 2019). Given its rich natural and cultural resources, Türkiye has considerable potential to position itself as a leading global destination in the wellness tourism market.

The literature review demonstrated the historical continuity of Anatolia's holistic healing practices, including music therapy, hydrotherapy, and herbal medicine, and revealed the evolution of Türkiye's treatment culture from Asclepians to Darüşşifas and its relevance to contemporary wellness tourism. However, Türkiye's health tourism sector lacks a distinct identity despite its deep-rooted history in traditional healing practices. Although wellness tourism is recognized by sector representatives in Türkiye, their reliance on European models rather than Anatolia's traditional healing heritage aligns with the study's results, which indicate a perception of wellness tourism similar to that in Europe. Moreover, although Türkiye possesses a rich and diverse wellness heritage, industry representatives have not actively promoted these unique assets. That is, these elements are not prominently featured in modern wellness tourism facilities. Instead, the sector continues to emphasize Turkish baths as its primary offering, while largely overlooking other traditional wellness practices rooted in Anatolian culture. This limited approach weakens Türkiye's competitive position against well-established wellness destinations that effectively promote their distinctive traditions.

The central argument of this study is that the prevailing perception of wellness tourism is shaped by products promoted by dominant countries. However, each destination possesses its own unique wellness traditions, which have the potential to enhance its competitiveness in the global market. To strengthen its position, Türkiye must redefine its wellness tourism model by integrating its traditional healing practices into contemporary wellness experiences. The concept of Darüşşifas, for example, has significant potential to enhance Türkiye's tourism branding and image, especially within the health tourism sector. To this end, the centers of traditional and complementary medicine practices, along with physical therapy and rehabilitation centers with accommodation, could integrate a broader range of historically rooted treatment methods. With the aim of positioning Türkiye as an international wellness tourism destination, these methods should be systematically promoted through comprehensive marketing strategies. This can enable Türkiye to establish a distinct wellness identity that both increases its market competitiveness and contributes to cultural preservation and local well-being.

Beyond the logic of the market, it should not be ignored that ancient healing methods offer social and natural benefits that can enable people to achieve a better quality of life despite living in a world characterized by increasing air pollution and climate change that is disrupting natural ecosystems. By revitalizing historically proven treatment practices that reflect the essence of Anatolia—its colors, scents, rhythms, and sounds—Türkiye can reinforce its brand image as a wellness destination while simultaneously improving the quality of life for local communities. In short, these ethical benefits of this tourism activity are also extremely important, apart from increasing the sector's profits and market share.

The findings of the study indicate the need for future interdisciplinary research to identify, preserve, and adapt Anatolia's ancient healing practices for modern tourism use. Using Türkiye as an example, it also suggests that other destinations should develop their own unique wellness concepts to strengthen their competitiveness in the global market.

5.1 Limitations

Naturally, this study has certain limitations. First, the busy schedules of sector representatives made it difficult to reach expert participants. While it was easier to access wellness tourism experts in European countries, the field in Türkiye is mostly dominated by professionals focused on medical tourism, both within the industry itself and in academia. Consequently, fewer Turkish wellness tourism experts were available, which limited the number of interviews that could be conducted. As well as being a limitation of the study, it also highlights a gap in the field of wellness tourism in Türkiye, thereby reinforcing the significance of the study's findings.

5.2 Highlights of the Study

- Wellness tourism is highly concentrated in Europe, North America, and Asia Pacific.
- General perception of wellness tourism consists of products that are highlighted by dominant countries.
- Wellness tourism is primarily shaped by the health and tourism sectors, along with the natural and cultural assets of the destination.
- It is suggested that destinations emphasize their unique and culturally embedded wellness practices
- Creating their own wellness concept will provide a significant advantage for developing destinations in their ability to compete with dominant markets.

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