

FROM WELLNESS EXPERIENCE TO DESTINATION CHOICE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESTORATION AMONG INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS IN UZBEKISTAN

Kudratov Mirjalol Khurshid ugli

Head of International Cooperation Department

Kattakurgan State Pedagogical Institute

ORCID: 0009-0003-5748-0834

kattakurganb.samsu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Wellness tourism has increasingly attracted scholarly attention because of its potential to support tourists' physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. However, research has often examined wellness motivation, restorative environments, well-being, and destination loyalty as relatively separate phenomena. This study develops an integrated psychological model explaining how wellness tourism experiences may influence tourists' behavioral intentions through psychological restoration. Drawing on Attention Restoration Theory and contemporary research on tourist well-being, the study conceptualizes perceived restorative destination qualities as an environmental stimulus, psychological restoration as an internal psychological mechanism, and destination-choice intention as a behavioral outcome. The proposed framework is particularly relevant to emerging wellness destinations, where destination attractiveness cannot be understood solely through conventional attributes such as price, quality, or accessibility. The study focuses on international tourists experiencing wellness-related tourism in Uzbekistan. A quantitative research design is proposed to examine the relationships among wellness-tourism motivation, perceived restorative destination qualities, psychological restoration, and destination-choice intention. Structural equation modeling will be used to test the proposed relationships and the mediating role of psychological restoration.

The article contributes to tourism psychology by repositioning psychological restoration from a general outcome of tourism into a potential explanatory mechanism connecting destination experiences with tourist behavior. It also extends existing wellness-tourism research by examining this mechanism within an emerging destination context.

Keywords: Wellness tourism; psychological restoration; restorative destination qualities; destination choice; tourist well-being; behavioral intention; Attention Restoration Theory; international tourists; Uzbekistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wellness tourism has developed from a predominantly health-oriented form of travel into a broader tourism phenomenon encompassing relaxation, stress reduction, psychological well-being, personal development, healthy lifestyles, and experiences of renewal. Recent research demonstrates that wellness-tourism motivation can influence experiential and reflective engagement, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. At the same time, tourism research has increasingly recognized that destinations may function as restorative environments.

Environments characterized by qualities such as being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility can support the recovery of attentional resources, providing a psychological basis for understanding why particular tourism experiences may contribute to well-being. Research specifically examining wellness tourism has shown that restorative environments can contribute to positive emotions, life satisfaction, loyalty, and revisit intention. More recent research has strengthened this perspective. Liu et al. found, using data from 942 wellness tourists, that perceived destination restorative qualities positively influenced psychological recovery and subsequently increased ontological security. Similarly, research on therapeutic landscapes has identified perceived restorative qualities and psychological recovery as mechanisms linking destination environments with tourists' quality of life.

Despite these advances, an important conceptual question remains:

How does psychological restoration translate a wellness-tourism experience into a behavioral response toward the destination?

This question is important because psychological restoration and destination choice are often investigated separately. Studies have examined restorative environments and well-being, while other studies have examined wellness motivation, satisfaction, destination loyalty, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth. For example, Ahn and Kim's study of 319 wellness tourists demonstrated relationships among wellness motivation, experiential and reflective engagement, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. More recently, research on wellness destinations has identified perceived price, perceived quality, hedonic well-being, and destination love as important conditions associated with revisit and word-of-mouth intentions. These findings suggest that destination choice cannot be adequately explained by environmental or marketing attributes alone. The psychological meaning created by the tourism experience may be an important missing link. This article therefore proposes and empirically examines a model in which **psychological restoration functions as a mediating mechanism between wellness-tourism experiences and destination-choice intention**. The study focuses on Uzbekistan as an emerging destination context. This setting is particularly relevant because international tourists encounter a combination of natural landscapes, cultural heritage, traditional practices, and wellness-related experiences. Rather than assuming that these resources are inherently restorative, the study examines how tourists themselves perceive them.

The study addresses three objectives:

1. to examine the relationship between wellness-tourism motivation and perceived restorative destination qualities;
2. to investigate whether perceived restorative destination qualities contribute to psychological restoration; and
3. to determine whether psychological restoration mediates the relationship between restorative tourism experiences and destination-choice intention.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Attention Restoration Theory and Tourism

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) proposes that prolonged use of directed attention can result in mental fatigue and that certain environments can facilitate cognitive restoration.

Kaplan and Kaplan identified four important restorative qualities: being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility. Tourism provides a particularly interesting setting for applying ART because travel physically and psychologically separates individuals from everyday environments and routines. Recent tourism research confirms the continuing relevance of ART. A multiwave study of tourist well-being found that attention restoration was associated with tourists' psychological well-being, although some restoration effects diminished after the trip. Research in nature-based tourism has similarly demonstrated relationships between restorative environments and health-related outcomes. However, tourism psychology research also cautions against mechanically transferring psychological theories into tourism. A recent review in *Annals of Tourism Research* argues that tourism research needs stronger adaptation and application of psychological theories to tourism-specific contexts.

The present study responds to this challenge by treating restoration not simply as an environmental property but as a subjective psychological process experienced by tourists.

2.2 Wellness Tourism Motivation

Motivation represents the psychological starting point of the tourism experience.

Wellness tourists may travel because they seek relaxation, escape, physical improvement, emotional renewal, personal development, social connection, or psychological recovery. Ahn and Kim identified six dimensions of wellness motivation: physical motivation, transcendence, relaxation, social motivation, self-esteem, and escape. Their findings showed that wellness motivation was positively associated with experiential and reflective engagement, which subsequently influenced satisfaction and destination loyalty. This suggests that motivation may influence not only what tourists do but also how they engage psychologically with the destination.

Accordingly:

H1: Wellness-tourism motivation positively influences tourists' perceptions of restorative destination qualities.

2.3 Perceived Restorative Destination Qualities

A destination does not automatically become restorative because it contains natural or cultural resources. Restoration depends partly on how tourists perceive and experience those environments. Previous research has established that perceived destination restorative qualities can influence psychological recovery, tourist well-being, and related behavioral outcomes. Importantly, recent research demonstrates that cultural destinations can be restorative as well as natural destinations. Cui et al. found that both natural and cultural destinations can facilitate psychological restoration, although novelty and familiarity influence these relationships differently. This is particularly relevant to Uzbekistan, where wellness-related experiences may involve both natural and cultural environments.

Therefore:

H2: Perceived restorative destination qualities positively influence psychological restoration.

2.4 Psychological Restoration as a Mediating Mechanism

The central proposition of this article is that restoration should be examined not merely as an outcome but as a psychological mechanism.

A tourist may encounter a beautiful landscape, culturally meaningful environment, or wellness service. However, the destination characteristic itself does not necessarily produce a behavioral response. The experience may first influence the tourist psychologically by reducing mental fatigue, creating emotional renewal, providing escape from everyday demands, or restoring attentional resources. This psychological change may then influence how the tourist evaluates the destination and whether they intend to return or recommend it. Recent research provides evidence for the first part of this pathway: perceived restorative destination qualities can facilitate psychological recovery. Research on therapeutic landscapes similarly identifies psychological recovery as an important mechanism connecting restorative qualities with quality-of-life outcomes.

The next step—linking restoration directly to destination-choice behavior—requires further empirical examination.

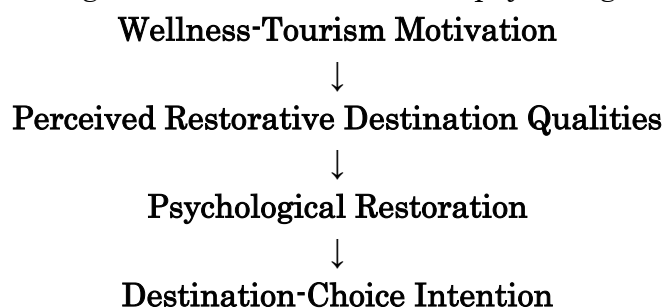
Therefore:

H3: Psychological restoration positively influences destination-choice intention.

H4: Psychological restoration mediates the relationship between perceived restorative destination qualities and destination-choice intention.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework integrates environmental and psychological perspectives:



The final behavioral construct may include:

- intention to choose Uzbekistan as a wellness destination;
- intention to revisit;
- intention to recommend the destination; and
- positive word-of-mouth intention.

The model deliberately places psychological restoration between destination experience and behavioral response.

This is the central theoretical contribution of the article.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional research design will be employed.

The target population consists of international tourists who have experienced wellness-related tourism in Uzbekistan. Participants will be recruited through tourism organizations, wellness

facilities, accommodation providers, destination sites, and relevant online channels where access is ethically and practically appropriate.

4.2 Measurement

All constructs should be measured using previously validated scales adapted to the wellness-tourism context.

The questionnaire will contain four principal sections:

Wellness-tourism motivation

Items will measure motivations such as:

- relaxation;
- escape;
- psychological recovery;
- personal well-being;
- physical health;
- personal development.

Perceived restorative destination qualities

The construct will reflect the restorative dimensions associated with ART, including:

- being away;
- fascination;
- extent;
- compatibility.

Psychological restoration

Items will assess perceived:

- mental refreshment;
- emotional renewal;
- reduction of mental fatigue;
- relaxation;
- recovery of psychological resources.

Destination-choice intention

Items will assess:

- intention to choose the destination for future wellness travel;
- revisit intention;
- recommendation intention; and
- positive word-of-mouth.

Before the main survey, a pilot test should be conducted to assess item clarity, reliability, and cultural appropriateness.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The proposed model will be tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

The analysis will proceed through several stages.

First, descriptive statistics will be used to examine the sample characteristics.

Second, reliability and validity will be assessed using appropriate indicators of internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Third, the structural model will be evaluated to determine the relationships between the proposed constructs.

Finally, mediation analysis will be conducted to determine whether psychological restoration significantly explains the relationship between perceived restorative destination qualities and destination-choice intention.

Bootstrapping should be used to estimate indirect effects and confidence intervals.

The choice between covariance-based SEM and PLS-SEM should be determined by the research objective, measurement model, distributional characteristics, and sample size rather than by convenience.

6. EXPECTED THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes to wellness-tourism research in three ways.

First, it connects environmental psychology with tourist behavior by conceptualizing psychological restoration as a mechanism rather than simply an outcome.

Second, it integrates research streams that have often been examined separately: wellness motivation, restorative destination qualities, psychological recovery, and behavioral intention.

Third, it extends restorative tourism research into an emerging destination context.

This is important because recent studies have already demonstrated restorative effects in established destinations and specific tourism settings. The contribution of the present study is therefore not to claim that restoration has never been studied, but to test whether the restoration mechanism can explain destination-choice behavior among international tourists in Uzbekistan.

This distinction strengthens the theoretical positioning of the article.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The proposed model has implications for destination management.

If psychological restoration is found to significantly influence destination-choice intention, wellness destinations should not be marketed solely through conventional attributes such as price, accommodation quality, accessibility, or medical facilities.

Instead, destination marketing could communicate psychological outcomes and restorative experiences, including:

- escape from everyday pressures;
- mental renewal;
- relaxation;
- connection with nature;
- cultural immersion;
- meaningful experiences; and

- opportunities for reflection.

For Uzbekistan, this could support the development of wellness products that integrate natural and cultural resources rather than treating them as separate tourism segments.

8. DISCUSSION

The central argument of this study is that wellness tourism should be understood not only as a collection of services but as a **psychological experience**.

A spa treatment, natural landscape, cultural site, or retreat activity may have limited behavioral significance if it does not generate a meaningful psychological response. Conversely, when tourists perceive a destination as providing distance from everyday demands, fascination, compatibility, and psychological renewal, the destination may acquire value beyond its physical attributes.

This perspective is consistent with recent research showing that restorative qualities can influence psychological recovery and that natural and cultural environments may both contribute to restoration.

It also complements recent research demonstrating that tourism experiences may progress from restoration toward transformation through motivation and reflection.

Consequently, psychological restoration may represent an important intermediate stage between **experiencing a destination and developing a behavioral relationship with it**.

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, a cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish temporal causality. Future research could use longitudinal or multiwave designs to examine whether restoration persists after tourists return home.

Second, self-reported psychological restoration may be influenced by recall and response biases. Future studies could combine questionnaire data with behavioral or physiological indicators where ethically and practically appropriate.

Third, focusing on Uzbekistan limits the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies could examine whether the proposed mechanism operates similarly across established and emerging wellness destinations.

Finally, future research could investigate potential moderators such as cultural background, novelty, familiarity, psychological resilience, travel purpose, and previous destination experience. Recent research already suggests that novelty and familiarity can influence restorative effects.

10. CONCLUSION

Wellness tourism provides an important context for understanding the relationship between tourism environments, psychological processes, and tourist behavior.

Existing research has demonstrated that restorative environments can support well-being and psychological recovery, while separate research has established relationships between wellness motivation, satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intention.

This article brings these research streams together by proposing psychological restoration as a mediating mechanism between restorative wellness-tourism experiences and destination-choice intention.

The proposed framework offers a theoretically grounded approach for examining why tourists may value particular wellness destinations and how psychological experiences contribute to subsequent behavioral intentions.

By examining international tourists in Uzbekistan, the study also introduces evidence from an emerging destination into the growing literature on tourism psychology and wellness tourism.

The broader implication is that successful wellness destinations may compete not only through the physical quality of their services and environments, but through their capacity to provide tourists with meaningful opportunities for psychological recovery, renewal, and well-being.

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