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An Analytical Perspective on the Concept of Wellness Tourism and a Review of Its Development in China

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Abstract: This article uses Venn diagrams to first analyze and differentiate wellness tourism, health tourism, medical tourism, and spa tourism individually. Then, it compares all four types of tourism, concluding that wellness tourism is a subsystem of health tourism. Specifically, medical tourism focuses on disease treatment, wellness tourism emphasizes the promotion of personal health, and spa tourism falls somewhere in between. Additionally, we define wellness tourists and wellness tourist's behavior. Finally, we discuss the current state of wellness tourism development in China from both supply and demand perspectives and examine the key topics and gaps that are presently under academic scrutiny. This paper aims to provide a global perspective on the understanding of wellness tourism and to offer practical and academic insights based on the current market situation of wellness tourism development in China.

Keywords: Wellness tourism, Wellness tourist, Wellness tourists' behavior, Development in China

1. Introduction

Rapid urbanization has caused damage and degradation to natural ecosystems, leading to environmental issues such as air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution, and waste pollution. Additionally, the fast-paced lifestyle and high-intensity work are posing serious threats to people's physical and mental health (Andreu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). As economic and social development levels increase, the demand for high-quality health and wellness products is growing stronger.

However, research on wellness tourism, both globally and in China, is still in its early stages, particularly in terms of defining the concept of wellness tourism (Huang, 2014; Zhou et al., 2023). In many academic articles, the concepts of wellness tourism, health tourism, medical tourism, and spa tourism are often used interchangeably, leading to a lack of solid theoretical foundations for policy implementation (Csirmaz & Pető, 2015; Liao et al., 2023; Voigt et al., 2011). Moreover, the definitions of wellness tourists and wellness tourist's behavior remain unclear, and the absorption and application of international wellness tourism research results are still at a vague stage. Based on this, this paper approaches the topic from the perspective of conceptual differentiation, discussing the distinctions and connections between wellness tourism, health tourism, medical tourism, and spa tourism, providing a clear definition of wellness tourism, while further explaining the definitions of wellness tourists and wellness tourist's behavior.

Additionally, this paper reviews the current development practices of wellness tourism in China from both the supply and demand perspectives and summarizes the academic community's current research on wellness tourism, identifying its contributions and shortcomings. The aim is to provide more theoretical and practical insights to guide the development of the global wellness tourism industry.

Specifically, the paper has three research objectives: the first is to differentiate between wellness tourism, health tourism, medical tourism, and spa tourism, and to ultimately provide a clear definition of wellness tourism. The second objective is to define wellness tourists and wellness tourism behavior. The third objective is to analyze the current state of wellness tourism development in China from a supply and demand perspective and to summarize the contributions and gaps in academic research on wellness tourism.

2. Literature Review

Academic definitions of wellness tourism, health tourism, medical tourism, and spa tourism often differ from one another. It is necessary to further differentiate wellness tourism from other types of tourism in order to conduct a more thorough analysis of the wellness tourism sector. Additionally, definitions of wellness tourist and wellness tourist's behavior are provided, laying the theoretical foundation for future research on wellness tourist's behavior.

2.1 Definition of Related Concepts in Wellness Tourism

The definition of wellness tourism can be explained from multiple perspectives. Many studies define wellness tourism from the angles of motivation and purpose (Gan et al., 2023). This paper, from an analytical standpoint, provides a definition of wellness tourism by examining the differences and connections between wellness tourism and health tourism, wellness tourism and medical tourism, as well as wellness tourism and spa tourism.

2.1.1 Identification of Wellness Tourism and Health Tourism

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines health tourism as a form of tourism aimed at achieving complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of illness or disease. It is more simply described as any kind of travel undertaken to improve the health of oneself or a family member (De la Barre et al., 2005). Health tourism can be seen as an umbrella term that includes all health-related tourism activities (Connell, 2006; Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001).

Csirmaz and Pető, (2015) suggest that wellness tourism is fundamentally different from health tourism, with the key distinction being that wellness tourism involves guests voluntarily using various services, and these activities are not covered by social insurance.

Health tourism can be categorized into two types: the therapeutic perspective, which is related to medical tourism, including surgeries and therapeutic treatments aimed at curing or preventing diseases; and the recreational perspective, which refers to wellness or well-being tourism, focusing on relaxation, leisure, and escaping daily routines (Quintela et al., 2016).

In summary, as shown in Figure 1, wellness tourism is regarded as a subcategory of health tourism and is generally classified from a recreational perspective that emphasizes leisure, relaxation, and the reduction of daily stress.

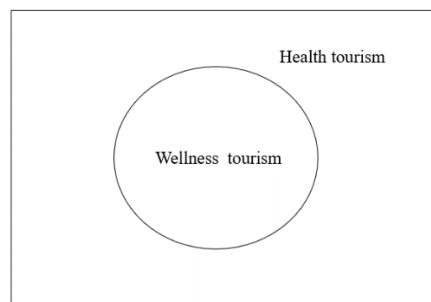


Figure 1. Venn Diagram of the Relationship Between Health Tourism and Wellness Tourism

2.1.2 Identification of Wellness Tourism and Medical Tourism

Despite the frequent confusion between wellness tourism and medical tourism, they are fundamentally different types of health tourism. While some literature claims that medical tourism has a broader scope than wellness tourism, this is not the case.

To begin with Hall, (2011) explains that medical tourism refers to the international phenomenon of individuals traveling—often across significant distances—to access healthcare services that are otherwise unavailable due to factors such as high costs, long waiting lists, or limited healthcare capacity in their home country. Moreover, this phenomenon includes the growing trend of individuals from developed countries combining medical travel with visits to tourist attractions.

Additionally, medical tourism can involve foreign travel specifically undertaken for medical treatment. The primary reasons for choosing medical tourism include higher service standards or more affordable healthcare options (Hanefeld et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Jones and Keith (2006) categorize medical tourism into two types based on the nature of visitors' choices. Obligatory travel occurs, when necessary, treatments are unavailable or illegal in the patient's home country, requiring travel to other regions to access the services. In contrast, elective travel is planned when the timing and costs are most favorable, even if the required treatments are available in the travelers' local areas.

When comparing medical tourism with wellness tourism, several key categories can be analyzed: tourist attitudes, characteristics, travel goals, motivations, and activities (see Table 1). Specifically, medical tourism involves patients traveling voluntarily to cure or treat diseases or medical conditions, with a focus on the standard and cost of care at the destination. Wellness tourism, on the other hand, involves individuals seeking to maintain or enhance their physical and mental health through non-surgical interventions or holistic activities aimed at improving overall quality of life. This distinction is echoed by scholars such as Mueller and Kaufmann (2001) and Voigt et al. (2011).

However, it is important to recognize that wellness tourism and medical tourism are not mutually exclusive. Both contribute to the continuum from "treatment" to "prevention." As competition intensifies within the healthcare sector, there is a growing need to shift from traditional treatment approaches to preventive care to improve health outcomes and reduce costs. In certain instances, the line between wellness tourism and medical tourism can become blurred.

Table 1. The Different Between Medical Tourism and Wellens Tourism

Classification	Medical tourism	Wellness tourism
Tourist attitudes	Reactive	Proactive
Tourist characteristics	Generally people who are sick	Generally people who are healthy
Travel goal	Travel to receive treatment for a diagnosed disease, ailment, or condition, or to seek enhancement.	Travel to maintain, manage, or Improve health and wellbeing
Travel motivation	Motivated by the desire for lower cost of care, higher quality care, better access to care, and/or care not available at home.	Motivated by the desire for healthy living, disease prevention, stress reduction, management of poor lifestyle habits, and/or authentic experience.
Travel activities	Activities are reactive to illnesses, medically necessary, invasive, and/or overseen by a medical doctor.	Activities are proactive, voluntary, non-invasive, and non-medical in nature.

2.1.3 Identification of Wellness Tourism and SPA tourism

The term "spa" originates from the Latin "solus par agula," meaning "health through water," signifying the use of water for health benefits. Historically, spas in Central and Eastern Europe had a strong focus on medical treatments, particularly involving therapeutic waters (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). However, modern spa practices have evolved to emphasize wellness, incorporating complementary therapies such as massage, mud baths, hydrotherapy, and exercise, as well as sensory treatments like sound, color, and climate therapy. These therapies aim to engage the senses of sight, touch, and reflection, promoting both physical and mental health. This shift has brought spa tourism closer to wellness-focused approaches, combining aspects of medical care with preventative measures (Derco, 2014)

M. Smith and Puczkó (2014) describe spa tourism as tourism focused on the relaxation, healing, or beautifying of the body in spas using preventative wellness and/or curative medical techniques. Building on this, Yurcu et al.(2017) define spa tourism as an integral part of the broader health and wellness movement, encompassing a variety of holistic curative and preventative activities. Scholars have highlighted that the most defining characteristic of spa tourism is its effectiveness in promoting both medical treatments and preventative care.

In China, spa tourism is often referred to as "hot spring tourism" or "hot spring wellness tourism." Hong and Cuiling (2021) define it as wellness tourism centered around hot spring resources. This form of tourism fully utilizes natural elements such as hot spring water, favorable microclimates, and ecological environments, supported by specialized recreational facilities and trained professionals. The objective is to harmonize body, mind, and spirit through activities like hot spring experiences, exercise, nutrition, health education, spirituality, cultural activities, and environmental preservation.

The definitions of spa tourism in Europe and China differ. as shown in Figure 2. Both agree that spa tourism falls under the category of health tourism, but in Europe, it blends medical and non-medical elements, integrating aspects of both medical and wellness tourism. European spa tourism is aimed at providing therapeutic and preventative services for both patients and healthy individuals. In contrast, Chinese spa tourism, especially in the form of hot spring wellness tourism, focuses more on prevention and wellness for healthy individuals, rather than offering treatments. The Venn diagram below reflects the differences in the definitions of spa tourism between Europe and China.

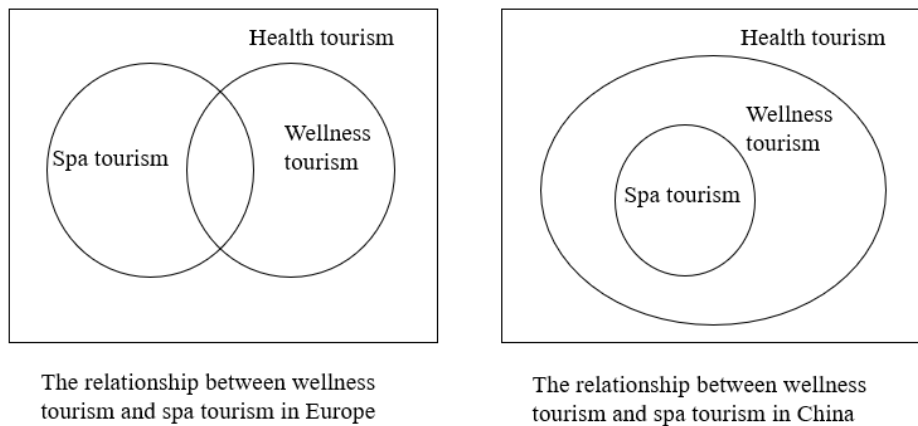


Figure 2. Venn Diagram of the Relationship Between Spa tourism and Wellness Tourism

2.1.4 Definition of Wellness Tourism

In terms of inclusivity, wellness tourism, along with medical tourism and spa tourism, can be regarded as a significant subcategory of health tourism. The intersection of spa tourism and wellness tourism is wellness spa tourism. In terms of developmental relationships, 'medical tourism - spa tourism - wellness tourism' corresponds to 'illness - health - wellness' and 'treatment - prevention - promotion'. That is, medical tourism is related to the treatment of disease; wellness tourism is related to the promotion of personal health(Chae & Kim, 2022; Liao et al., 2023), and spa tourism is somewhere in between. In China wellness spa wellness tourism is an important component of wellness tourism. The Figure 3 provides a more detailed explanation.

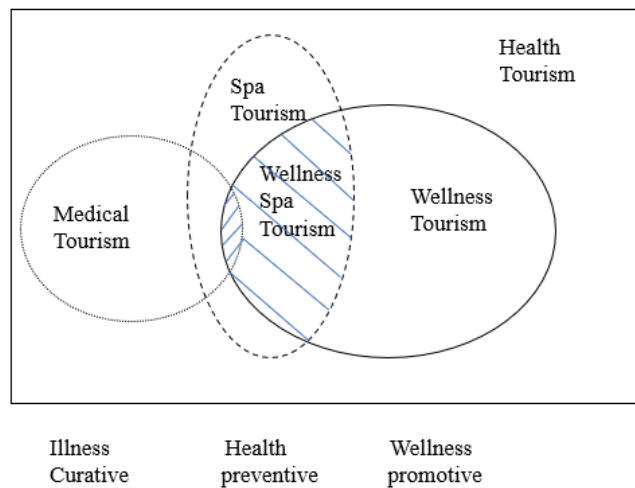


Figure 3. Venn Diagram of the Relationship Between Health Tourism, Medical Tourism, Spa Tourism, and Wellness Tourism

2.2 Definition of Wellness Tourist

Wellness tourism targets healthy individuals who have an active interest in maintaining or enhancing their health. Unlike medical tourism, wellness tourism generally consists of people who are already healthy and proactively seeking experiences to maintain or improve their overall wellness. Conversely, medical tourism is largely reactive, involving individuals who are suffering from illnesses and are motivated to travel by a desire to receive higher-quality treatment at lower costs.

The Global Wellness Institute (2018) further categorizes wellness travelers into "primary purpose wellness travelers" and "secondary purpose wellness travelers." A primary purpose wellness traveler is someone for whom wellness is the sole purpose or motivating factor for their trip and destination choice. In contrast, a secondary purpose wellness traveler is someone who seeks to maintain wellness while taking any type of trip.

In summary, wellness tourism can be defined as tourism activities in which healthy individuals actively participate with the primary or secondary purpose of maintaining or enhancing their own health. These tourists proactively seek

experiences that promote their overall wellness, whether through specialized wellness activities or by incorporating wellness elements into regular travel.

2.3 Definition of Wellness Tourist's Behavior

Behavior studies are an indispensable topic in the field of social research. In tourism, consumer behavior research remains significant, with researchers often referring to this area as "travel behavior" or "tourist behavior." According to Li (2020), tourist behavior refers to the decision-making and practical processes through which tourists satisfy their own travel needs, select tourism products, and complete purchasing and consumption activities via interactive experiences with those products.

This definition considers tourism consumer behavior as comprising two parts. The first part is the practical process of purchasing decisions, which involves researching the actual processes that tourism consumers undergo when making purchasing decisions. Specifically, it includes tourists' behaviors during need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision implementation, and post-purchase behavior. The second part is the purchasing decision-making process, referring mainly to the psychological activities and behavioral tendencies that occur prior to the purchasing practices of tourism consumers. From a behavioral perspective, before and during consumption, tourists are influenced by internal psychological factors (e.g., motivation, perception, learning, attitude, personality) and external environmental factors (e.g., social groups, social culture, marketing mix). These factors influencing purchase decisions constitute the purchasing decision-making process of tourists. This definition highlights the importance of studying influencing factors in tourism consumer decision-making processes and further categorizes these factors into internal and external influences.

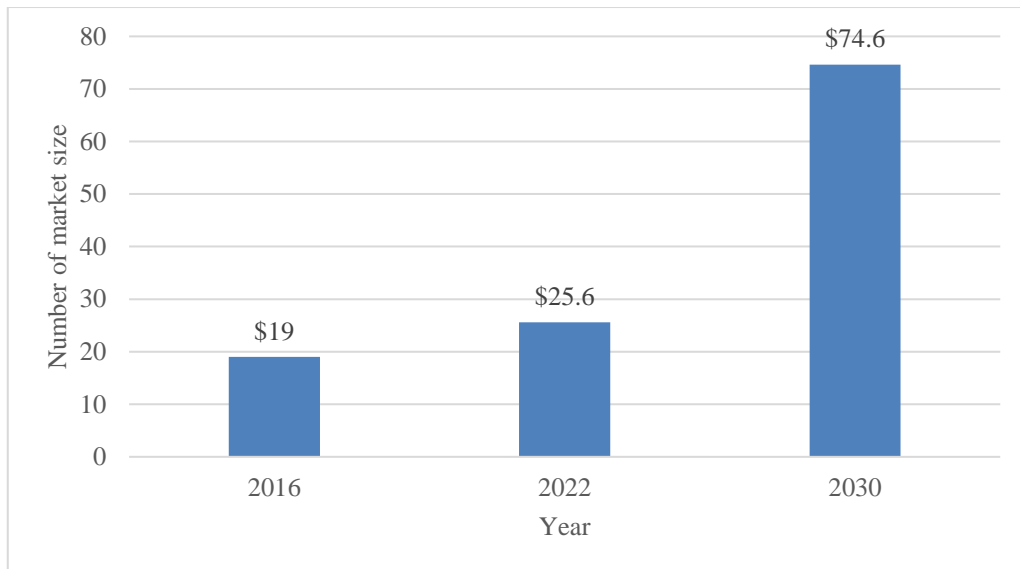
As a new niche market within wellness tourism, the behavior of wellness tourists presents a particularly interesting and meaningful research direction. Ailing (2017) found that, compared to traditional tourism projects, wellness tourism encompasses richer elements, with tourists staying longer at destinations and spending more. Wellness tourists place greater emphasis on health and psychological well-being, resulting in more refined travel experiences.

In summary, the study of wellness tourists' behavior focuses on the actions of wellness tourists as they collect information about wellness tourism products, make decisions and purchases, consume, evaluate, and process these products. This behavior is influenced by both external and internal factors, making the variables involved highly complex and difficult to measure accurately.

3. The Development of Wellness Tourism in China

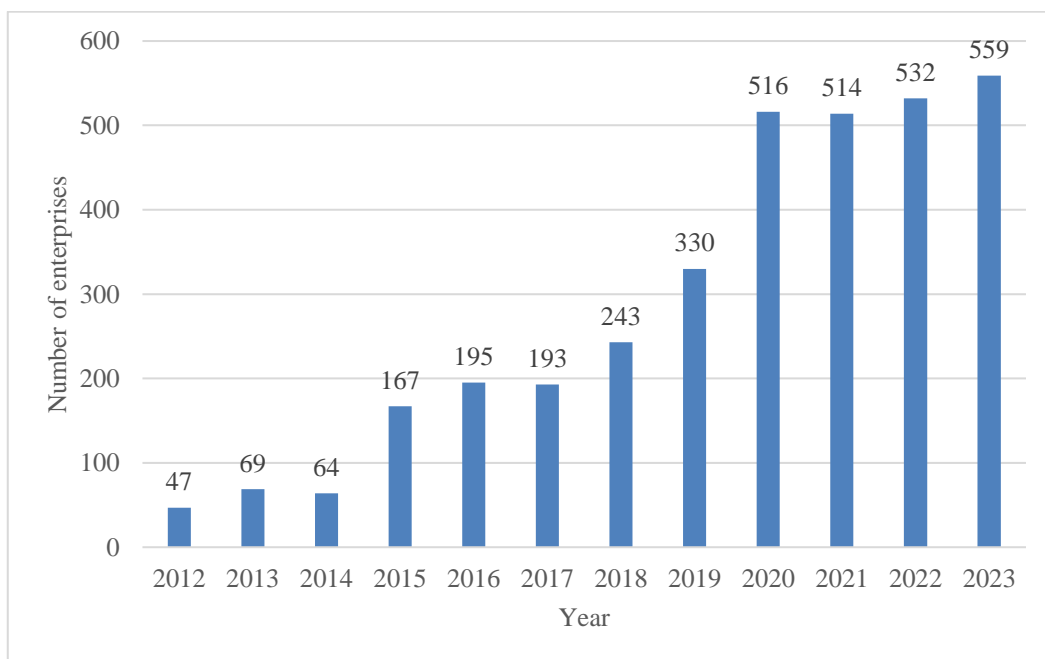
China's wellness tourism market has shown significant growth momentum in recent years, achieving revenues of USD 25.6 billion in 2022. This strong performance reflects the increasing demand among Chinese consumers for wellness-related travel experiences. It is expected that by 2030, the market size will climb to USD 74.6 billion (Grand View Research, 2024), highlighting the growing importance of health and well-being in China's tourism industry.

From 2023 to 2030, the market is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.3%. This rapid growth can be attributed to multiple factors, including increased disposable income among residents, enhanced health awareness, and the middle class's pursuit of holistic health experiences, as shown in Figure 4. Additionally, supportive policies from the Chinese government toward the wellness industry and investments in infrastructure have provided strong backing for market growth. Overall, China's wellness tourism market is in a phase of rapid development, benefiting from rising consumer health consciousness and strong government support. For industry participants, seizing this trend by offering innovative and high-quality wellness tourism products and services will help gain a competitive advantage and meet the evolving market demands.



Data source: National Tourism Standardization Technical Committee
Figure 4. Market Size of Wellness Tourism Industry, China, 2016-2030

From the perspective of market supply, the number of wellness tourism enterprises has grown exponentially. According to data from the large business information database Qichamao, there were 3,429 operating wellness tourism enterprises in China between 2012 and 2023. The number increased from 47 in 2012 to 559 in 2023, with a compound annual growth rate of approximately 25.24%. COVID-19 hurt the tourism industry, especially in terms of investment, at the beginning of 2020. However, investment in wellness tourism defied the trend, reaching 516 enterprises in 2020, 514 in 2021, 532 in 2022, and 559 in 2023. Figure 5 illustrates the number of enterprises engaged in wellness tourism-related services in China from 2012 to 2023.

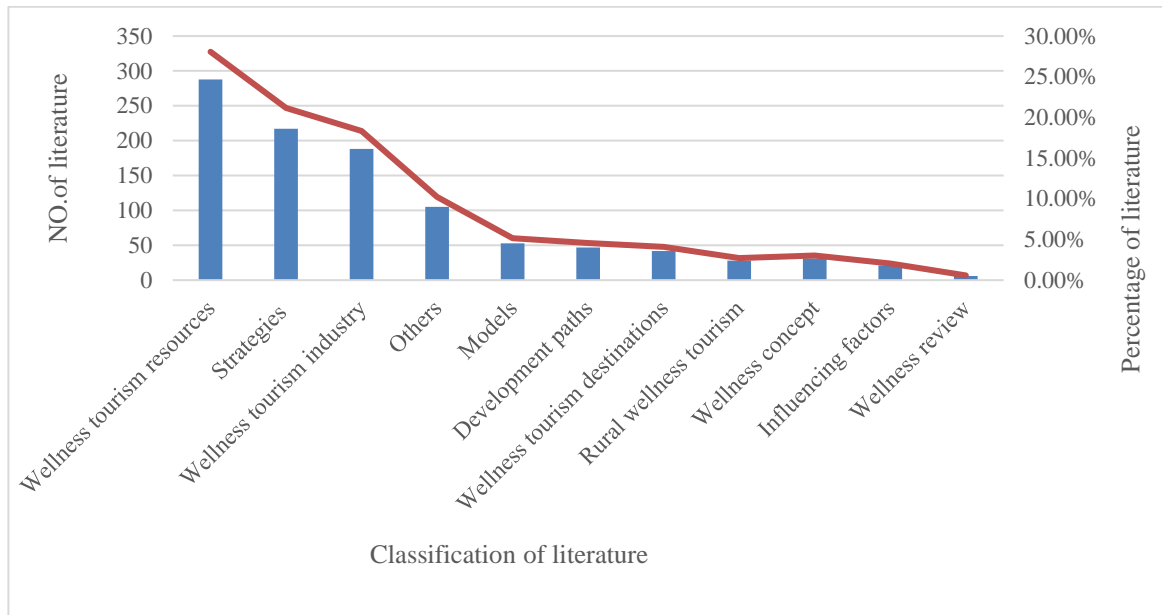


Data source: The data collated from Qichamao. <https://www.qichamao.com/>
Figure 5. the number of enterprises engaged in wellness tourism-related services in China from 2012 to 2023

Although it is evident that wellness tourism is growing in China in terms of consumer demand, enterprise supply, and government planning, theoretical and empirical study on the subject in academia does not keep up with or even lags behind the needs of the market (Li et al., 2020; Zhao & Wang, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020).

According to a visual study of the CNKI database, 1026 articles on wellness tourism have been published between the first article in 2009 and the 2024. The primary focus is on (1) research on wellness tourism resources, with a total of 263 articles accounting for 28.07%; (2) research on government macro strategies, model studies, and development paths,

with a total of 317 articles accounting for 30.90%; (3) research on wellness tourism industry, with a total of 188 articles accounting for 18.32%; (4) research on wellness tourism destinations, with a total of 24 articles accounting for 4.09%; and (5) concept and review of wellness tourism. (5) Wellness tourism concept and review research, 37 articles, accounting for 3.60%; (6) Rural wellness tourism research, 28 articles, accounting for 2.73%; (7) Others, 105 articles, accounting for 10.23%; and (8) Influencing factors, 21 articles, accounting for 2.05%, including even more negligible influence factor analysis focusing on consumer behavior, as shown in Figure 6.



Data source: CNKI database, obtained by collating primary data from 2009 to 2024. <https://www.cnki.net/>.
Figure 6. Classification of literature about wellness tourism on CNIK, China, 2009-2024

It can be observed that while the number of articles on macro-level analysis and supply-side studies is high, micro-level analysis and demand-side studies account for very little, especially those focusing on factors influencing consumer behavioral intentions ((Duan, 2021; Shen et al., 2019). Consequently, although wellness tourism is developing rapidly with the support of the Chinese government and strong market demand, theoretical and practical research remains insufficient—particularly in micro-level studies on the behavior of wellness tourists.

4. Conclusion

This study has clarified the concept of wellness tourism by distinguishing it from health tourism, medical tourism, and spa tourism. Wellness tourism is defined as a submarket of health tourism, distinct from medical and spa tourism, representing a higher level of wellness promotion. The focus on wellness tourists' behavior encompasses their actions in gathering information about wellness tourism products, making decisions and purchases, consuming, evaluating, and processing these products. This behavior is influenced by a complex interplay of external and internal factors, making the variables involved highly intricate and challenging to measure accurately.

In China, the wellness tourism industry is experiencing robust growth, propelled by strong market demand and substantial governmental support. Despite this expansion, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive academic research, especially at the micro level. Future studies should prioritize empirical analyses of consumer behavior and preferences to provide actionable insights for industry stakeholders. Bridging this research gap will not only enhance theoretical understanding but also contribute to the sustainable and informed development of the wellness tourism sector in China.

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