



## Wellness Travel Motivation after COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Phuket, Thailand

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### Abstract

Changes in travel behavior and motivations during COVID-19 had a major impact on wellness tourism destinations to redesign their products to satisfy wellness travelers' needs. The study aimed to explore the wellness tourists' behavior and their travel motivations after the emergence of the pandemic and investigate the impact of demographic characteristics on wellness motivations. Quantitative research methods with 464 self-completed questionnaires were utilized. The study investigated travel behavior of tourists: length of stay, travel party, travel purpose, expenses for wellness activities during the stay, source to obtain information, wellness tourism products/treatments used during the stay, and wellness tourism products/treatments that international tourists prefer having in Phuket. The top five treatments categories were identified. The study identified six push and four pull motivations, whereas socialization and safety and access were found to be influential while selecting the destination. Sociodemographic characteristics such as regions, genders and ages had a significant impact on wellness tourists' motivations.

**Keywords:** Wellness, Tourist Motivation, Push and Pull Motivation, Travel Behavior, COVID-19 Pandemic

### Introduction

Wellness tourism has become one of the fast-growing travel trends as it is a “travel associated with pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one’s wellbeing” (GWI report 2018, p.25). However, COVID-19 caused the closure of wellness hotels, resorts and even wellness destinations due to a high risk of pandemic transmission during wellness treatments and activities. The wellness economy fell from \$720 billion in 2019 to \$436 billion in 2020 and the decrease in wellness trips from 936 million to 601 million due to the pandemic (GWI report, 2022 p.1-2).



Despite the pandemic consequences, the wellness and spa industry have high interest by individuals for health and wellness activities: maintenance and promotion of physical and mental health through different activities (yoga, meditation, online fitness classes); the holistic practices to boost the immune system, (Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, herbal medicine); stress relieving practices and other spiritual wellness practices (Choudhary & Qadir, 2021). The Report of Global Wellness Institute predicted that wellness tourism will grow by 21% annually and could generate \$1127- 6 billion in 2025 (GWI report, 2022 p.11-12).

During the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand has also experienced a severe economic impact on travel and hospitality businesses, especially of southern regions, including Phuket (The Nation Thailand, 2022). The Pandemic created a need for reviewing travel behavior and motivations for wellness tourism. Emphasizing promoting health and wellness tourism could be a new tourism model to stimulate Phuket's economy, and to satisfy the newly appearing travel needs.

Motivations for wellness tourism are often related to proactive things that individuals do to maintain a healthy lifestyle, reduce stress, prevent disease, improve themselves (body and spirit), experience new wellness related products and services, and enhance wellbeing (Smith & Puczko, 2008; Hashemi, Kiumarsi & Mohammadi 2015). Some of the studies have already analyzed the importance and the relationship between travel motivation of wellness travelers and potentially related factors such as wellness destination (Dvorak, Saari & Tuominen 2014), wellness facilities and services (Kim & Batra, 2009), socio-demographic characteristics (Jonsson & Devonish, 2008; Han, Tanyatanaboon & Brennan, 2020), the lifestyle related to wellness (Hallab, 2006; Kim & Batra, 2009; Težak, Damijanić, Zdravko, 2013; Chen, Chang & Tung 2014). Additionally, a substantial number of research studies emphasize the strong relationship of push and pull motives in travel motivation (Crompton, 1979; Jonsson & Devonish, 2008; Dryglas & Salamaga, 2018).

Previous studies also showed that travel motivations can be influenced by different socio-demographic characteristics (Rančić et al., 2014; Dimitrovski & Todorović, 2015; Blešić et al., 2019; Han, et al., 2020; Kessler et al., 2020). For example, Jönsson and Devonish (2008) and Han, et al. (2020) found that motivations of wellness tourists vary on their nationality and region. Blešić et al. (2019), showed that female respondents gave higher evaluations and a positive attitude towards shopping for health products in comparison with males. They also found that younger age wellness center visitors were more interested in “recreation” and “mental therapy” than older generations. Kessler, et al. (2020) also found that men and women have different motivations and behavior for wellness holidays. Additionally, Baby Boomers and Gen X were seeking “rest and relaxation” and “nature and disconnect” while the Millennial generation behavior was



related to “escape”, “rejuvenation”, and “connection with nature”. Therefore, the following hypothesizes were developed:

H<sub>1</sub>: Regions have an impact on the wellness tourist motivation.

H<sub>2</sub>: Gender has an impact on wellness travel motivations.

H<sub>3</sub>: Age has an impact on wellness travel motivations.

Exploration of factors that are standing under travel motivation can help marketers and industry professionals to understand travelers’ needs and meet expectations by developing products and services. In opposition to previously conducted studies on wellness tourism, there is still a gap in understanding what motivates international wellness tourists to travel after COVID - 19 pandemic.

### Objectives

The objectives of this study were the following.

1. To identify wellness travel behaviors of international wellness tourists visiting Phuket after COVID-19 pandemic
2. To assess the wellness travel motivation to Phuket after COVID-19 pandemic
3. To investigate the impact of sociodemographic characteristics on wellness motivations.

### Research Methodology

A self-administered questionnaire was developed based on previous wellness tourism related studies. The target respondents were international tourists who obtained wellness treatments or programs during their stay in Phuket. A total of 41,188 international tourists have arrived in Phuket in November 2021. The Yamane formula was used. The sample size was 396. However, to maximize the response rate, 500 questionnaires were distributed and 464 returned and usable. A simple random sampling approach was used. To identify whether they were wellness tourists, the screening question “Have you tried any of the wellness treatments/programs during your stay in Phuket?” was asked. If the answer was “Yes”, then the interviewer requested tourists’ willingness to participate in the study.

In order to measure the wellness travel motivation, 31 push motivational items were adopted from Koh et al., (2010), and Kessler et al., (2020), Meanwhile 23 pull motivation items were benchmarked from Aleksijevits (2020), Han, et al., (2017). Han, et al. (2020), Hashemi et al. (2015), Kukusta, et al. (2014), Lo, et al. (2015), and Blešić at al., (2019). A 5-point Likert-type scale, with assigned values ranging from “Very unimportant - 1” to “Very important - 5” was applied. The list of the wellness tourism



treatments/products categories was benchmarked from Cornelia Voight and Christof Pforr, (2013, p.28).

The IOC was conducted to check the validity of the instrument. Questionnaires were reviewed by 4 academic experts in the tourism field. Then a pilot test of 30 questionnaires was randomly distributed. The reliability test of push (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.879) and pull (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.915) items were accepted.

## Findings

### Profile of respondents

Out of 464, 277 or 60% were male and 187 or 40% were females. In terms of age, most of the respondents were at the age of 30-39 (205 or 44%), followed by the age group of 40-49, and 20-29, (22% and 22%, respectively). Regarding marital status, the majority of the respondents were married (180 or 39%), and single (176 or 38%). In terms of travel behaviors, the majority of the respondents stayed for 1 to 2 weeks (31.50%) and 1 to 2 months (24.10%), and not more than a week (19.00%). Most of them travelled alone (36.20%), 24.50% with family. 20.50% with friends and 18.80% with a partner. Most of the respondents visited Phuket for leisure and attractions (46.10%), followed by visiting friends or family (20.00%), and business or work related (17.70%). A comparatively small percentage of the respondents came directly for wellness programs and treatments (8.40%) and for long stays (7.80%). The budget for wellness treatments were mainly 501-1000USD (21.60%), 2001-3000USD (20.70%) and 100-500USD (17.90%).

The most popular sources of information used by wellness tourists were Facebook (50.00%), Tourism website (45.90%), Instagram (36.00%), YouTube (25.90%), Travel agency (21.10%). Additionally, the popular wellness treatments in Phuket among wellness tourists were body and facial beauty, water based and sweat - bathing treatments and facilities, herbal medicine, manual-pressure based manipulative body - based therapies, and exercise and fitness. As can be seen in Table 1, Thai massage (52.80%) was the most popular treatment, followed by aromatherapy (39.20%), sauna (36.90%), foot massage (29.70%) and reflexology (27.60%).

**Table 1:** Wellness treatments tourists prefer to do when visiting Phuket

Top treatments for tourist when visiting Phuket	Frequency	%
<i>1. Body and Facial Beauty:</i>		
Thai massage	245	52.80
Foot massage	138	29.70
Pedicure	115	24.00



Top treatments for tourist when visiting Phuket	Frequency	%
<i>2. Water based and sweat - bathing treatments and facilities:</i>		
Sauna	171	36.90
Caldarium	70	15.10
Hydrotherapy	42	9.10
<i>3. Herbal medicine:</i>		
Aromatherapy	182	39.20
Vitamins and other dietary supplements	57	12.30
Bach flowers	42	9.00
<i>4. Manual-pressure based manipulative body – based therapies:</i>		
Reflexology	128	27.60
Medical massage	98	21.10
Bodywork therapies	47	10.10
<i>5. Exercise and fitness:</i>		
Self-guided activities	80	17.20
Gymnasium	75	16.20
Private classes with a personal trainer	69	14.90

### Push and Pull Motivation

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure was applied to quantify the degree of inter-correlations among 31 push and 23 pull motivational variables, and the appropriateness of factor analysis. For 31 push motivation, the (KMO) statistic was calculated as 0.90. Bartlett's test of sphericity also showed the significance of the correlation matrix (A.C-S =9126.47, df= 465,  $p < 0.00$ ). For 23 pull motivational variables KMO statistics were at 0.93 and Bartlett's test of sphericity confirmed the significance of the correlation matrix (A.C-S=8132.02, df=253,  $p < 0.00$ ). As Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin was above 0.90, both 31 push and 23 pull motivations were interrelated and with shared common underlying dimensions.

The exploratory factor analysis was conducted by a varimax-rotated factor matrix, motivational variables with a factor loading of 0.4 or higher were clustered together. A similar approach was applied to wellness related studies by Lim, Kim, & Lee (2015). Six push factors were identified (Table 2 ), and named “healthy diet and meditation”, “movement and fitness”, “self-care”, “rest and relaxation”, “socialization”, and “learning about wellness” according to the common characteristics of the variables in each factor.



The factors “socialization” (M=3.85), “rest and relaxation” (M= 3.8), and “learning about Wellness” (M=3.60), were identified with higher mean scores.

**Table 2:** Factor Analysis of Push Motivations

Push Factor	Mean	S.D.	E.V.*	V.E.*	C.A.*
Factor 1: Healthy Diet and Meditation	3.32	0.90	8.23	26.53	0.94
Factor 2: Movement and Fitness	3.53	0.76	3.71	11.97	0.87
Factor 3: Self-care	3.54	0.80	2.40	7.73	0.81
Factor 4: Rest and Relaxation	3.82	0.69	2.31	7.44	0.64
Factor 5: Socialization	3.85	0.75	2.15	6.94	0.67
Factor 6: Learning about Wellness	3.60	0.68	1.69	5.44	0.72

Remark: E.V.=Eigen Value; V.E.=Variance Explained; C.A.=Cronbach’s alpha

For pull motivations, four factors were identified (Table 3), and named as “safety and access” (M= 4.26), “variety and quality of wellness treatments” (M=3.91), “pricing and reputation” (3.76), and “climate and attractiveness” (M=3.65).

**Table 3:** Factor Analysis of Pull Motivations

Pull Factor	Mean	S.D.	E.V.	V.E.*	C’s A
Factor 1- Safety and Access	4.26	0.76	6.08	26.42	0.94
Factor 2: Variety and Quality of Wellness Treatment	3.91	0.70	4.29	18.67	0.87
Factor 3: Pricing and Reputation	3.76	0.72	2.81	12.20	0.87
Factor 4: Climate and Attractiveness	3.65	0.86	2.66	11.54	0.85

Remark: E.V.=Eigen Value; V.E.=Variance Explained; C.A.=Cronbach’s alpha

### Region and Wellness Motivation

ANOVA test was used to test whether the regions have an impact on the wellness tourist motivation (Table 4). The results showed that four push and four pull factors showed significant difference with  $p \leq 0.05$ . Then Post Hoc Tests were conducted. Table 5 showed that respondents from Europe (M= 3.04) have had lower motivations to take trips to Phuket for the “healthy diet and meditation” factor than other regions. Respondents from Australia (M=3.83) and Europe (M=3.63) had higher motives for taking a wellness trip to satisfy “movement and fitness” than tourists from Asia (M=3.18) and America (M=3.35). Furthermore, respondents from Europe, Asia and Australia were similarly motivated to take trips to Phuket for “self-care”, and “rest and relaxation”. American respondents were the least motivated to take wellness trips for “self-care” (M=3.27), “rest & relaxation” (M=3.63) factors.



In terms of pull motivations, European respondents gave higher rates for “safety and access”, and “variety and quality of wellness treatment” than other regions. American tourists care about “safety and access”, much less than Australians, while Australian tourists perceive “variety and quality of wellness treatment” as more important than Asian tourists. Lastly, “pricing and reputation” and “climate and attractiveness” factors are more important for the respondents from Australia and Europe than those from America and Asia. The fore results of the study are in contrast with Han et al., (2020), in terms of “price perception” for American tourists to take wellness trips to Thailand.

**Tables 4:** Regions and Wellness Motivations

	F-test		Post-hoc Test			
	F	p	Europe	Asia	America	Australia
Healthy Diet and Meditation	10.94	0.00	3.04 <sup>A</sup>	3.53 <sup>B</sup>	3.50 <sup>B</sup>	3.51 <sup>B</sup>
Movement and Fitness	15.09	0.00	3.63 <sup>B</sup>	3.18 <sup>A</sup>	3.35 <sup>A</sup>	3.83 <sup>B</sup>
Self-care	5.10	0.02	3.57 <sup>A</sup>	3.56 <sup>A</sup>	3.27 <sup>B</sup>	3.71 <sup>A</sup>
Rest and Relaxation	2.98	0.03	3.88 <sup>A</sup>	3.83 <sup>A</sup>	3.63 <sup>B</sup>	3.88 <sup>A</sup>
Safety and Access	34.27	0.00	4.61 <sup>A</sup>	4.02 <sup>BC</sup>	3.78 <sup>B</sup>	4.20 <sup>C</sup>
Variety and Quality of Wellness Treatments	15.85	0.00	4.13 <sup>A</sup>	3.60 <sup>B</sup>	3.73 <sup>BC</sup>	3.91 <sup>C</sup>
Pricing and Reputation	17.65	0.00	3.99 <sup>A</sup>	3.56 <sup>B</sup>	3.42 <sup>B</sup>	3.84 <sup>A</sup>
Climate and Attractiveness	24.53	0.00	3.90 <sup>A</sup>	3.24 <sup>B</sup>	3.27 <sup>B</sup>	3.92 <sup>A</sup>

Remark: \* p<0.05, means not significantly different at 5% level

### Gender and Wellness Motivation

Table 5 showed the mean scores of pushes and pull factors between male and female. For male respondents, the most important push motivation factor was “Rest and relaxation” (M=3.90), while highest mean score for female respondents was given to factor “socialization” (M=3.85). However, when the independent sample t-Test was conducted, the results showed that there is no significant different between males and females in push and pull motivation factors except “rest and relaxation” where male respondents were more motivated by “rest and relaxation” than female respondents (p<0.05).

**Table 5:** Gender and Wellness Motivation

Factors	Male		Female		t-Test	
	Mean	S.d	Mean	S.d	t-value	p-value
Rest and Relaxation	3.90	0.67	3.71	0.72	2.94	0.03*

Remark: \* p<0.05



### Age and Wellness Motivation

ANOVA test was conducted, and the results showed that 2 push and 4 pull factors were at significant difference with  $p \leq 0.05$ . For further analysis, Post Hoc Tests were used (Table 6). In terms of push motivations, the results showed that the respondents at the age of “less than 30” ( $M=3.05$ ) have lower motivation to take wellness trips for “healthy diet and meditation” than other age groups. The respondents at the age of 30-39 have higher motives in “learning about wellness” than the respondents in the age of less than 30.

**Tables 6:** Age and Wellness Motivations

	F-test		Post-hoc Test		
	F	p	Less than 30	30-39	40 and over
Healthy Diet and Meditation	8.32	0.00	3.05 <sup>A</sup>	3.47 <sup>B</sup>	3.34 <sup>B</sup>
Learning about Wellness	3.24	0.04	3.50 <sup>A</sup>	3.68 <sup>B</sup>	3.54 <sup>AB</sup>
Safety and Access	4.53	0.01	4.21 <sup>A</sup>	4.17 <sup>A</sup>	4.41 <sup>B</sup>
Variety and Quality of Wellness Treatments	3.93	0.02	3.75 <sup>A</sup>	3.95 <sup>B</sup>	3.97 <sup>B</sup>
Pricing and Reputation	5.16	0.00	3.65 <sup>A</sup>	3.72 <sup>B</sup>	3.92 <sup>B</sup>
Climate and Attractiveness	3.45	0.03	3.58 <sup>A</sup>	3.59 <sup>A</sup>	3.81 <sup>B</sup>

Remark: \*  $p < 0.05$ , means with the same letter are not significantly different at 5% level

### Discussion

COVID-19 has significantly changed individuals' way of obtaining information. Due to quarantine measures and home isolations, people had to rely on tech information in all life aspects from online: shopping, doctor consultation, distance working, online training sessions and connecting with other people through social media. (GWI report, 2021). As a result, after cancelation of travel ban, tourists switched from information mode “word of mouth” to social media and website. The results of our studies also confirmed that. Furthermore, according to wellness treatments/products selection, even during leisure stay in Phuket, international tourists continue to cope with stress, support their immune system, pay attention to healthy meal selection, control their weight, and maintain/preserve their health.

Looking closely at the finding, “socialization” was the most important push motive meanwhile the least motivation was for “healthy diet and meditation”. This finding supported studies by Dimitrovski & Todorović (2015) where socialization opportunity was



one of the main factors for wellness visitors. However, during the COVID-19 outbreak, wellness tourists prefer to reconnect with family and friends, build relationship during their international travel but emphasize on ‘social connectedness’ with or desire to avoid contact with unknown people due to the risk of getting the virus (Aebli, Volgger & Taplin, 2021). Among pull, “safety and access”, was the most important factor, followed by “variety and quality of wellness treatments”. According to Aleksijevits, (2020), during pandemic British consumers were mostly interested in safety and security and cleanliness when selecting a destination. The author suggested creating marketing campaigns relying on these pull factors. Similarly, safety and access became the most important pull factor during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for international tourists (Aebli et al., 2021).

Different motivations were found for regions. For instance, “pricing and reputation” and “climate and attractiveness” factors are more important for the respondents from Australia and Europe than those from America and Asia. Therefore, results of the study are in contrast with Han et al., (2020), in terms of “price perception” for American tourists to take wellness trips to Thailand.

The findings revealed that both genders have common motivations for wellness holidays. The results can also be supported by previous studies by Jönsson & Devonish (2008), and Dimitrovski & Todorović (2015), who found that gender did not emerge as an important determinant. However, after COVID-19, “rest and relaxation” became more important for males than females when planning for the wellness trip. This might be because after COVID-19 there was severe economic impact on different businesses. Stress related to internal and external factors could be a leading motive for men looking for “rest and relaxation” during their wellness trips in Phuket. Similar findings were seen in the studies by Tsai (2012), when during economic crisis males were trying to get away from their stressful daily routine by using spa services.

The respondents at the age of 30-39 have higher motives in “learning about wellness” than the respondents at the age of less than 30. This can be partly connected with the previous studies by Kessler et al., (2020) who found that Millennial generation behavior was related to “escape”, “rejuvenation”, and “connection with nature”. Furthermore, our results were partly corresponding to the Blešić et al., (2019) who found that older wellness visitors have significantly higher health awareness than younger ones.

In terms of pull motivations, the respondents in the age of “less than 30” were less motivated by “variety and quality of wellness treatments” and “pricing and reputation” than other age groups while selecting trips to wellness destinations. That might be because younger travelers preferred to accept challenges and travel more after COVID-19, and therefore price and variety of treatments weren’t crucial factors for them to be attracted to the destination (Bhatta et al., 2022).



For the respondents in the age of “40 and over”, “safety and access” and “climate and attractiveness”, were determined as more important factors than the respondents in the younger age groups. This study supported Pongwat (2017) who found that climate and attractiveness were the important motivators for senior wellness visitors. The highly rated interest for “nature and disconnect” factor was for tourists at the age of 40-54, particularly ‘to escape the demands of everyday life’ and “to experience activities outdoors” is consistent with Kessler et al., (2020).

The severe impact of the COVID -19 on wellness tourism led to changes in tourism behavior and travel motivation. This study helped to understand tourist behaviors and motivations for wellness holidays and the impacts of sociodemographic characteristics in terms of gender, age, and region on wellness tourists’ motivation. Most of wellness tourists at the age of 30-39 who travel alone with a travel purpose to Phuket for leisure to release their stress from COVID-19 crisis. The length of stay was between 1-2 weeks. Wellness tourists also showed their interest to wellness treatments related to body and facial beauty, water based and sweat - bathing treatments and facilities, herbal medicine, manual-pressure based manipulative body – based therapies, and exercise and fitness. Thai massage, aromatherapy, sauna, foot massage and reflexology were the most popular treatments wellness tourist planned to used when they stay in Phuket. This could help destination service provider to develop wellness packages and create programs that would fulfill current demand for the requested treatments. COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the importance of the factor’s “socialization” and “rest and relaxation” and “safety and access” for wellness tourists planning their visit to Phuket. This study also showed that wellness tourists from different regions have different travel motivations. For example, Australian and European tourists pay more attention to fulfilling their “movement and fitness”, “self-care” and “rest and relax” when they took wellness trip. They are more concerned about “safety and access”, “pricing and reputation”, and “climate and attractiveness” of the destination than American tourists. Additionally, male wellness tourists want to escape from their routine in order to reduce their stress level and improve their night sleep more than female tourists. Wellness tourists at the age of 40 or older pay more attention to all pull factors than young wellness tourists.

Therefore, in order to attract tourists from Australia, Europe and Asia who plan their trips for wellness purposes, the destination should provide a comfortable atmosphere and environment in order to help them to get better night sleep, reduce stress levels and feel better after escaping from daily routine. These programs also can attract male tourists as they expressed their higher motivation for rest and relaxation. Eventually, wellness destinations should fulfill tourists with the expansion of different wellness treatments related to body and facial care, water-based and manual-pressure techniques.



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