# FACTORS AFFECTING GUEST SATISFACTION IN WELLNESS TOURISM EXPERIENCE IN KOTA KINABALU, SABAH

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**Abstract.** Wellness tourism has emerged as a rapidly growing sector within the global hospitality industry, driven by travellers increasingly seeking holistic physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Understanding the specific experiential determinants of guest satisfaction is essential for sustainable destination management, particularly in emerging wellness hubs. This study investigated the impact of the four dimensions of the Experience Economy theory (entertainment, aesthetic, escapism, and education experiences) on guest satisfaction among tourists engaging in wellness tourism activities in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Employing a quantitative cross-sectional research design, primary data were gathered via a structured online questionnaire distributed through convenience sampling to 150 adult tourists who had participated in at least one wellness activity in the region. Analytical procedures utilising SPSS Version 30 included descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis. The empirical results revealed that the regression model was statistically significant, accounting for 63.5% of the variance in overall guest satisfaction. Specifically, the entertainment experience and aesthetic experience exerted a statistically significant positive influence on guest satisfaction, with entertainment emerging as the single most powerful predictor. Conversely, the education experience and escapism experience demonstrated no statistically significant effect on guest satisfaction within this specific destination context. These empirical findings demonstrate that memorable, enjoyable entertainment activities and visually appealing natural environments are the primary catalysts of guest happiness in Kota Kinabalu's wellness sector. This study contributes to the literature by contextualising the Experience Economy framework in regional Malaysian wellness destinations, providing strategic insights to improve service offerings and elevate guest satisfaction.

**Keywords**: *aesthetic experience, education experience, entertainment experience, escapism experience, guest satisfaction, wellness tourism*

## Introduction

Wellness tourism currently constitutes one of the most rapidly expanding sectors within the global tourism and hospitality paradigm. According to the Global Wellness Institute (2023), the worldwide market for wellness tourism is valued at over $800 billion and continues to expand as travellers prioritise trips that focus on health and well-being. Wellness tourism encompasses various activities aimed at enhancing physical, mental, and spiritual health, including spa treatments, yoga, meditation, fitness classes, and nature-based outdoor excursions. Kota Kinabalu, located in the state of Sabah, has rapidly become a popular destination for wellness tourism, heavily favoured for its stunning natural beauty, serene environment, and abundance of cultural activities. According to the Sabah Tourism Board, as reported by Malay Mail (2026), Sabah

welcomed 3.79 million visitors in 2025, generating RM8.74 billion in tourism revenue. Of these, 2.1 million (55%) were domestic visitors, while 1.69 million (45%) were international visitors. The top source market was from China, with 657,528 visitors, and the main entry point is Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA), which handled 7.96 million passengers in 2024. The tourism sector is now the second-largest contributor to Sabah's GDP, employing 387,600 people across various sectors.

Despite the rapid growth and economic importance of wellness tourism in Sabah, limited empirical research has examined how different dimensions of the wellness tourism experience influence guest satisfaction, particularly in Kota Kinabalu. To address this gap, this study utilises the Experience Economy Theory developed by Pine and Gilmore (1999), which suggests that memorable experiences such as entertainment, aesthetics, escapism, and education are essential in shaping guest satisfaction. Recent literature in the Malaysian context has highlighted the importance of these dimensions. For instance, a recent study by Hakim Romdzan et al. (2025) investigated how wellness tourism experiences drive tourist engagement among Generation Z university students in Shah Alam, Selangor. Their research found that educational, entertainment, and escapist experiences all significantly influence engagement, with escapism playing the most profound role in allowing youths to disconnect and immerse themselves. However, their findings focused heavily on engagement rather than overall satisfaction.

While Hakim Romdzan et al. (2025) focused on youth engagement in an urban academic hub, the current study seeks to determine which of these experiential dimensions make a broader demographic of visitors most satisfied with their wellness experience in the nature-rich setting of Kota Kinabalu, where visitors engage in wellness primarily for stress relief and relaxation. Understanding these experiential dynamics is therefore important, as a mismatch between wellness offerings and tourists' expectations may result in inefficient allocation of resources by operators and potentially reduce destination competitiveness. The significance of this study lies in providing empirical insight into the role of experiential dimensions in shaping visitor satisfaction within the specific context of nature-based wellness tourism in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. These findings improve knowledge regarding visitor perception of different aspects of their wellness experience in the natural environment. Moreover, the study applies to the development of future wellness experiences aimed at improving well-being by taking into account the destination's intrinsic features.

### *Research objectives*

The research objective are include: (1) To examine the relationship between wellness tourism experience and guest satisfaction in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; (2) To identify the most influential wellness tourism experience dimension affecting guest satisfaction.

## *Literature review*

### *Wellness tourism in the hospitality context*

Wellness tourism is a rapidly expanding sector within the global hospitality industry, with the Global Wellness Institute (2023) estimating its worldwide market value at over $800 billion. Modern travellers increasingly seek vacations that holistically maintain or enhance their physical, mental, and emotional health (Smith and Puczkó, 2014). Consequently, wellness amenities such as spa treatments, mindfulness programmes, and fitness facilities have transitioned from optional luxuries to mandatory service

requirements. Providing these tailored wellness services positively impacts guests' emotional responses, their overall satisfaction, and their likelihood of returning to a destination (Liu et al., 2023; Chen and Chen, 2010; Salleh et al., 2019).

### *The experience economy in wellness tourism*

This study is grounded in Pine and Gilmore (1999) Experience Economy theory, which categorises consumer experiences into four distinct realms: entertainment, aesthetics, escapism, and education. Within wellness tourism, these experiential dimensions contribute to shaping the emotions of tourists and their general satisfaction with the trip. Entertaining activities lead to positive emotions and a higher perception of trip value and hence to greater guest satisfaction (Wan Daud et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2023). The domain of aesthetics employs an aesthetically pleasing, tranquil environment for cultivating deeper emotional satisfaction (Liu et al., 2023; Chen and Chen, 2010). In addition to leisure activities, escapism in a tranquil environment allows people to escape from everyday stressors, thus fostering mental renewal and psychological well-being. Furthermore, through the educational aspect, tourism is facilitated through the provision of health workshops and fitness classes, which aid individuals in having increased self-awareness and help them practice healthy behaviours (Raj et al., 2025). Together, all these aspects make wellness tourism a holistic process which greatly enhances the quality of an individual’s life (Raj et al., 2025).

### *Recent developments and research gap*

Recent scholarly developments further validate the application of this theory in regional Malaysian contexts. A 2025 study by Hakim Romdzan et al. (2025) demonstrated that educational, entertainment, and escapist dimensions significantly predict tourist engagement in urban Malaysian settings, with escapism functioning as the most profound driver for psychological well-being. Despite this growing body of literature in Asian markets (Wan Daud et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2016), a research gap remains regarding how these individual experiential components directly affect customer satisfaction in nature-centric destinations. Specifically, limited empirical research investigates the nuanced impacts of entertainment, aesthetic, escapist, and educational dimensions on guest satisfaction in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

### *Conceptual framework and hypotheses*

The conceptual framework posits that the four dimensions of the wellness experience act as independent variables influencing the dependent variable, guest satisfaction. By conceptualising satisfaction as a holistic evaluation distinct from internal affective outcomes, the framework examines the contribution of each dimension to satisfying the expectations of the tourists.

H1a: The entertainment dimension of the wellness experience has a significant positive effect on guest satisfaction;

H1b: The aesthetic dimension of the wellness experience has a significant positive effect on guest satisfaction;

H1c: The escapist dimension of the wellness experience has a significant positive effect on guest satisfaction;

H1d: The education dimension of the wellness experience has a significant positive effect on guest satisfaction.

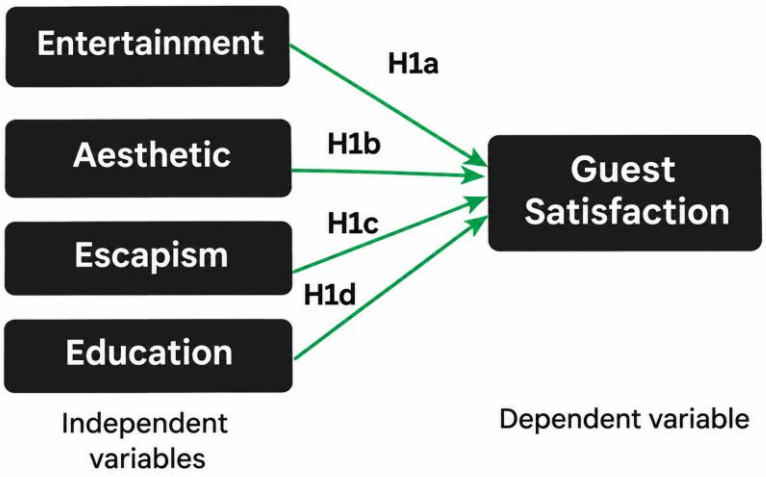



***Figure 1.*** *Conceptual framework.*

## Materials and Methods

The research employed a quantitative and cross-sectional research design in order to examine the relationship between the experience in wellness tourism and the guests satisfaction in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The research's target population comprised adult guests who have engaged in wellness tourism activities in the destination and are at least 18 years old. As per the Sabah Tourism Board (2025), there were about 2.3 million domestic tourists and 1,498,709 international visitors to Kota Kinabalu in 2025. An a priori power analysis was performed to determine the minimum number of respondents required for the research using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2009). Using a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), alpha level of 0.05, 80% power ($1 - \beta = 0.80$), and four predictor variables, the minimum number of respondents was 85. Participants were selected via a non-probability convenience sampling technique (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016) to reach eligible respondents who met the inclusion criteria. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire administered via Google Forms through convenience sampling. To reach both domestic and international tourists who had visited wellness destinations in Kota Kinabalu, the survey link and QR code were distributed between March and May 2026 across targeted social media platforms, including Kota Kinabalu tourism-related Facebook pages and online travel groups. In total, 150 usable responses were received for analysis. The measurement scales for both the independent variables and the dependent variable have been adapted from the existing literature (Liu et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2007), and measured on a five-point Likert scale. A pilot study was done before data collection to assess the clarity and readability of survey items.

Data were then analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 30. First, descriptive statistics were computed to summarise respondent demographics, followed by Cronbach's alpha reliability test for internal consistency (*Table 1*). Before conducting

multiple linear regression, it is necessary to verify several statistical assumptions. Specifically, the presence of multicollinearity was tested based on Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) measures; all values of Tolerance varied between 0.394 and 0.621 (above the threshold of 0.10), and all values of VIF varied between 1.609 and 2.536 (significantly lower than the cut-off value of 10), which means that multicollinearity was not an issue. The assumption of normality was confirmed through the Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardised Residuals, which showed points closely aligned along the diagonal line. Additionally, inspection of the residual scatterplot demonstrated a rectangular distribution of standardised residuals across predicted values, establishing homoscedasticity and linearity. Finally, multiple linear regression analysis was executed to assess the influence of the four wellness experience dimensions on guest satisfaction.

***Table 1**. Reliability analysis of constructs.*

| Construct | Number of Items | Cronbach's Alpha | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Wellness Experience Education | 4 | 0.817 | Good |
| Wellness Experience Entertainment | 4 | 0.833 | Good |
| Wellness Experience Aesthetic | 4 | 0.768 | Acceptable |
| Wellness Experience Escapism | 4 | 0.834 | Good |
| Guest Satisfaction | 4 | 0.798 | Acceptable |

## Results and Discussion

### *Demographic profile*

Of the 150 respondents, the majority were female (63.3%) and aged between 18–29 years old (40.7%). Domestic visitors constituted the largest group (53.3%), followed by local residents (38.0%) and international visitors (8.7%). The primary purpose for participating in wellness tourism was relaxation (34.7%) and stress relief (32.0%).

### *Correlation analysis*

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed that all independent variables were positively and significantly related to guest satisfaction ($p < 0.001$ ). The Entertainment Experience had the highest positive correlation ($r = 0.747$ ), followed by Aesthetic Experience ($r = 0.671$ ), Escapism Experience ($r = 0.488$), and Education Experience ($r = 0.394$).

### *Multiple regression analysis*

The overall multiple linear regression model was statistically significant, $F (4145 = 63.038, p < .001$) accounting for 63.5% of the variance in guest satisfaction ($R_2 = .635$, Adjusted $R_2 = .625$ ). Among the four predictor variables, only entertainment ( $\beta = .540$, $t = 8.480, p < .001$) and aesthetic ($\beta = .306, t = 3.832, p < .001$) emerged as significant positive predictors of guest satisfaction. Conversely, education ($\beta = -.062, t = -.894, p = .373$) and escapism ( $\beta = .104, t = 1.379, p = .170$) did not show statistically significant impacts. *Table 2* details the regression coefficients for the direct effects.

***Table 2**. Regression coefficients for direct effect on guest satisfaction.*

| Predictor | β (Standardised) | Std. Error | t-value | p-value | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Education | -0.062 | 0.052 | -0.894 | 0.373 | Not Supported |
| Entertainment | 0.540 | 0.058 | 8.480 | < 0.001 | Supported |
| Aesthetic | 0.306 | 0.071 | 3.832 | < 0.001 | Supported |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Escapism | 0.104 | 0.052 | 1.379 | 0.170 | Not Supported |

The results of the study indicated that the entertainment and aesthetic experiences greatly influenced guests' satisfaction, whereas educational and escapism experiences did not. The study revealed that the greatest positive influence on guests' satisfaction was the entertainment experience ($\beta = 0.540$), indicating that fun and emotionally uplifting activities create special memories that make visitors happier. This is followed closely by the aesthetic experience ($\beta = 0.306$), showing that the natural beauty and physical atmosphere of Kota Kinabalu significantly contribute to guest satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Pine and Gilmore (1999) Experience Economy Theory, which proposes that engaging and memorable experiences create greater value for consumers. In wellness tourism, entertainment may extend beyond simple enjoyment by generating positive emotions and supporting relaxation and psychological restoration. Activities such as nature-based recreation, cultural performances, island excursions, yoga sessions, and other wellness-oriented experiences can therefore contribute to visitors' overall satisfaction. This is also consistent with research highlighting the role of experiential quality and emotional responses in shaping satisfaction and well-being in tourism contexts (Liu et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2016).

Aesthetic experience emerged as the second significant predictor of satisfaction, highlighting the importance of Kota Kinabalu's physical and natural environment. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), an aesthetic experience occurs when individuals become immersed in an attractive environment and enjoy being present in it. In Kota Kinabalu, features such as beaches, islands, sea views, and lush greenery provide a serene setting in which tourists can relax. The relationship between the destination environment, tourist experience, and subsequent satisfaction or well-being is well-supported by existing literature (Wan Daud et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2023; Chen and Chen, 2010; Oh et al., 2007). Consequently, tourists are drawn not only to recreational entertainment but also to the restorative qualities of the destination.

In contrast, escapism and education were not significant predictors of satisfaction. This finding differs from Hakim Romdzan et al. (2025), who identified escapism and education as important experiential dimensions among Gen Z visitors in an urban setting. The difference may reflect variations in destination characteristics and visitor motivations. Vespestad et al. (2026) noted that escapism in nature-based tourism is closely associated with tourists' well-being, suggesting that its role may depend on how visitors perceive and seek escape within a particular setting. In the present study, where 66.7% of respondents travelled primarily for relaxation and stress relief, the natural environment itself may already provide the sense of escape expected from a wellness experience. Consequently, escapism may be less distinctive as a source of satisfaction when it is inherently embedded in the destination experience. Similarly, the non-significant effect of education may indicate that visitors were less concerned with acquiring knowledge and more focused on experiencing relaxation and enjoyment. This interpretation is consistent with the broader emphasis on experiential quality, emotional responses, and well-being in wellness tourism research (Liu et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2016). Thus, the findings suggest that the relative contribution of the four Experience Economy dimensions may vary according to destination context and visitor motivations rather than demonstrating a uniform influence across wellness tourism settings.

## *Implications*

The findings offer implications for wellness tourism practitioners, destination managers, and researchers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. For the practitioners, the strong effect of entertaining and aesthetically pleasing experiences implies that there is a need for wellness tourism providers as well as resort managers to introduce appealing but soothing experiences, like sunset yoga, sound baths, and culture-based wellness experiences, without compromising on the natural and aesthetic attributes of the destination. The educational dimension could be delivered through non-formal methods like self-discovery of information or through herbal tea experiences without compromising the restorative nature of the experience. Proper environmental management and conservation of the scenic natural areas are necessary at the destination level in order to maintain the positive attributes for wellness experiences. As far as research is concerned, there is a possibility that the contribution of the four Experience Economy dimensions could differ depending on the tourism settings. Thus, further studies could use SEM as this technique is ideal theoretically when it comes to analysis of the various dimensions and pathways related to Experience Economy theory including mediation effects of relaxation or emotional wellbeing between the dimensions and behavioural variables like revisiting intentions.

## Conclusion

The study confirms the validity of the Experience Economy Theory within the nature-based wellness tourism subsector of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The data gathered proves that the level of guest satisfaction within this subsector is largely determined by the entertainment and aesthetic experience, and that escapism and education seem to act as secondary factors in creating the experience of the visitors. It will be possible to better integrate the wellness experiences of guests by making use of more entertaining activities related to wellness and maintaining the aesthetics of the natural environment by doing so. From a theoretical perspective, these findings provide a foundation for future researchers to utilise Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) when examining the relationships between the four experiential dimensions and guest satisfaction, as SEM is a robust structural framework designed to evaluate complex relationships among multiple constructs.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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