

# ANALYZING HOW WELLNESS TOURISM EXPERIENCES AND TOURIST ENGAGEMENT IN SHAH ALAM, SELANGOR

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**Abstract.** This study explores how educational, entertainment, and escapist experiences in wellness tourism influence tourist engagement among Gen Z university students in Shah Alam, Selangor. It aims to offer insights that enhance service design, emotional connection, and loyalty among young wellness tourists, contributing to sustainable tourism strategies. Using a quantitative approach, data will be collected via structured questionnaires distributed both online and in person at wellness sites. A pilot test will ensure reliability and validity, and multiple regression analysis will assess the impact of the three experiential dimensions on engagement. Findings are expected to show that all three dimensions positively influence engagement, with escapist experiences playing the most significant role by allowing tourists to disconnect and immerse themselves. This study is original in its focus on spa-based wellness tourism among university students, extending experiential tourism literature by empirically examining how specific experiences foster participation, emotional connection, and repeat visitation in an urban Southeast Asian context.

**Keywords:** *wellness tourism, tourist engagement, experiential dimensions, Generation Z, Shah Alam, sustainable tourism*

## Introduction

Wellness tourism has evolved from a niche market into a mainstream trend, increasingly attracting younger demographics like university students, particularly in urban areas such as Shah Alam, Malaysia. With growing mental health awareness and post-COVID stress, students are seeking wellness experiences, ranging from spa therapies to mindfulness retreats, to manage stress and enhance well-being. Shah Alam, home to major educational institutions and diverse wellness offerings, is emerging as both an academic and wellness destination, supported by urban policies and digital wellness innovations. However, existing research is heavily focused on older adults and international travelers, leaving a critical gap in understanding Gen Z's motivations and engagement with wellness tourism. Despite Gen Z's interest in mental health, authenticity, and experiential travel, few studies explore how specific experiential dimensions: education, entertainment, and escapism; shape their engagement. The current literature lacks both empirical data and theoretical insight into how these components affect younger travelers' satisfaction, loyalty, and participation. This study addresses two key gaps: (1) Conceptual: The need to examine how distinct experiential dimensions influence engagement in wellness tourism. (2) Demographic: The underrepresentation of university students in wellness tourism research, despite their growing relevance as a target market.

The research aims to investigate whether Shah Alam's wellness offerings align with Gen Z students' needs, and how these experiences impact emotional connection, participation, and repeat visitation. To address these issues, this study poses the

following research questions: (1) What is the relationship between educational experiences and tourist engagement in wellness tourism? (2) What is the relationship between entertainment experiences and tourist engagement in wellness tourism? (3) What is the relationship between escapist experiences and tourist engagement in wellness tourism? (4) To what extent do combine wellness tourism experiences (educational, entertainment, escapist) predict tourist engagement? These questions are tested through the following hypotheses: (H1): Educational experiences positively influence tourist engagement; (H2): Entertainment experiences positively influence tourist engagement; (H3): Escapist experiences positively influence tourist engagement. (H4): Combined wellness tourism experiences significantly predict tourist engagement.

## ***Literature review***

### ***Conceptualizing wellness tourism experiences***

Wellness tourism is defined as travel associated with maintaining or enhancing one's physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Smith and Kelly, 2006). Wellness tourism experiences vary widely and may include spa treatments, yoga, mindfulness retreats, educational wellness workshops, and immersive cultural therapies. Rather than passive consumption, contemporary wellness tourism emphasizes active participation and personal transformation. In this context, Pine and Gilmore (1999) Experience Economy Framework, which classifies experiences into four dimensions: educational, entertainment, esthetic, and escapist; has gained renewed importance. The present study adapts this framework and focuses on three of its dimensions: educational, entertainment, and escapist experiences, as they are the most relevant to student tourism contexts.

### ***Educational experiences***

Educational experiences involve opportunities that allow travelers to acquire new knowledge, gain insights, or enhance skills during their visit. In wellness tourism, this may include seminars on nutrition, mindfulness classes, or wellness coaching sessions (Liu et al., 2023). Several studies have emphasized that educational experiences in tourism settings lead to deeper emotional and cognitive engagement. Visitors who participated in structured wellness learning activities reported significantly higher levels of engagement and loyalty. Uslu et al. (2024) further highlighted that wellness programs perceived as "informative and credible" led to increased tourist satisfaction and long-term commitment. These studies confirm the notion that acquiring meaningful knowledge during travel enhances perceived value, which in turn strengthens visitor engagement. From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective, educational experiences fulfill the need for competence, a psychological need associated with mastering new skills and gaining knowledge. In the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), learning outcomes can influence tourists' attitudes and perceived behavioral control, encouraging repeat visits and proactive engagement in wellness activities.

### ***Entertainment experiences***

Entertainment experiences are defined as enjoyable, passive, and often social experiences that enhance the fun and relaxation value of a wellness trip (So et al., 2020). In Shah Alam, this may include observing fitness sessions, watch cultural performances,

or participate in light-hearted wellness events like wellness festivals. Entertainment has a recognized, albeit complex, role in wellness tourism. While entertainment activities provide short-term enjoyment, Khoi et al. (2020) argue that their integration with core wellness experiences (e.g., music during yoga or storytelling during meditation) can enhance immersion and satisfaction. Moreover, interactive entertainment helps foster social bonds and enhances perceived authenticity of the wellness experience, contributing to greater emotional engagement. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework is suitable to explain entertainment's effect. Entertainment serves as a stimulus that triggers emotional arousal (organism), which then manifests as tourist engagement (response). Furthermore, entertainment enhances relatedness in SDT, satisfying the psychological need to connect with others and share joy.

### ***Escapist experiences***

Escapist experiences are characterized by full immersion and active participation, allowing tourists to “escape” from daily routines and engage in transformative experiences. In wellness contexts, this may include silent retreats, digital detox programs, forest bathing, or immersive spiritual experiences (Thrash and Elliot, 2003). He et al. (2023) found that escapist experiences result in deep emotional attachment and lasting engagement with wellness destinations. Similarly, Quaye (2025) reported that digital detox programs led to improved mindfulness and prolonged tourist satisfaction. Escapist activities have been associated with psychological detachment, recovery, and identity transformation, all of which are crucial for meaningful engagement. In SDT, escapist experiences fulfill autonomy and related needs, enabling visitors to disconnect from external pressures and connect with inner values. In TPB, escapist experiences positively influence attitudes and perceived control, increasing the likelihood of future participation. These experiences reduce cognitive overload and foster deeper mental restoration, encouraging sustained interaction with wellness services.

### ***Tourist engagement***

Tourist engagement refers to the psychological and behavioral involvement of tourists with a destination or experience. It includes three interrelated dimensions: cognitive (mental attention), emotional (affective connection), and behavioral (active participation and loyalty) (Liu et al., 2023). Martins et al. (2025) argue that engagement is a stronger predictor of revisit intention and word-of-mouth than satisfaction alone. Moreover, tourist engagement significantly increases when experiences are meaningful, immersive, and personally relevant. In wellness tourism, emotional connection is especially important, as the purpose of travel often relates to healing, self-improvement, or stress relief. Tourist engagement has also been linked to brand loyalty and destination attachment, making it a key metric for tourism marketers and planners. Emotional engagement is a critical driver of return visits and post-visit behaviors, such as social media sharing and advocacy.

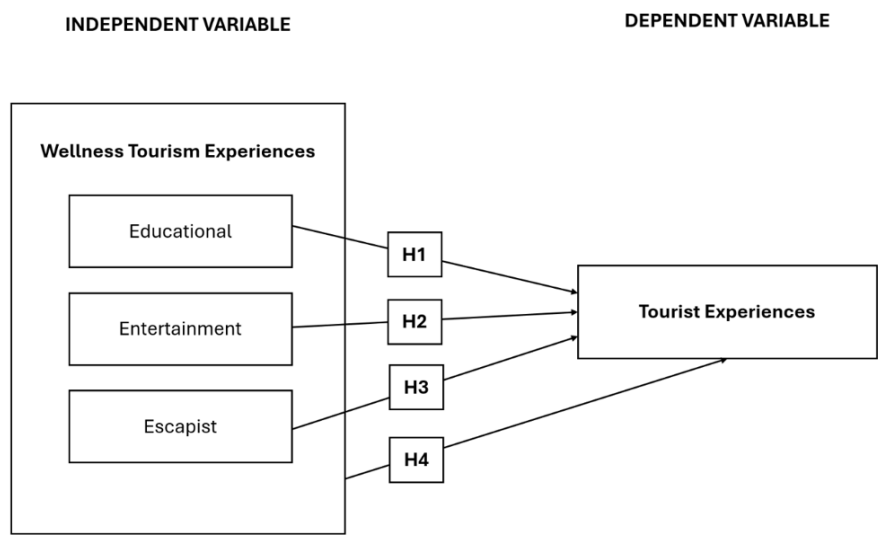
### ***Integrated wellness tourism experience and engagement***

While each experience dimension—educational, entertainment, and escapist—has a distinct effect on tourist engagement, their cumulative impact may be even more powerful. Liu et al. (2023) argue that integrated experiences lead to heightened involvement and satisfaction. When wellness tourism is designed to address learning,

fun, and emotional immersion simultaneously, it creates a holistic value proposition. A holistic wellness experience satisfies all three psychological needs postulated by SDT: competence (through learning), relatedness (through entertainment), and autonomy (through escapism). TPB supports the idea that when tourists perceive high value and alignment with social norms and personal goals, their engagement is amplified.

***Theoretical framework and hypothesis***

This framework reflects the study’s alignment with experiential theory, SDT, and TPB, offering a holistic view of how multi-dimensional wellness tourism experiences shape tourist engagement. The theoretical framework can be shown in *Figure 1*. The hypothesis include: (H1): Educational experiences positively influence tourist engagement; (H2): Entertainment experiences positively influence tourist engagement. (H3): Escapist experiences positively influence tourist engagement; (H4): Wellness tourism experiences significantly predict tourist engagement.



***Figure 1. Theoretical framework.***

***Applied underpinning theories***

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it expands the application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to the context of wellness tourism by exploring how experiential dimensions fulfill intrinsic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Thrash and Elliot, 2003). By integrating concepts of educational value, entertainment engagement, and escapism into a coherent framework, the study advances existing experiential tourism models. It also contributes to understanding how tourist engagement, defined as a combination of emotional connection, behavioral participation, and cognitive involvement, is shaped by nuanced experiential factors, especially among Gen Z travelers in an urban Malaysian context.

## Materials and Methods

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory design with a deductive reasoning approach to investigate how dimensions of wellness tourism experiences influence tourist engagement among university students in Shah Alam. Data is collected at a single point in time to identify patterns within a specific population. The explanatory design aims to assess causal relationships between educational, entertainment, and escapist experiences (independent variables) and tourist engagement (dependent variable). Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the study tests theory-driven hypotheses using statistical methods to provide empirical insights into the predictors of tourist engagement in wellness tourism. The study utilized a structured, self-administered questionnaire based on validated measurement scales, divided into five sections: screening, demographics, educational, entertainment, escapist experiences, and tourist engagement. Items were adapted from established wellness and experiential tourism literature to ensure content validity. Each construct was measured using multiple 5-point Likert scale items, capturing varying levels of agreement, a common approach in tourism and behavioral research. To ensure reliability and clarity, a pilot test with 10 university students was conducted. Based on the results, item wording was refined, and Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency. Two items were removed to improve reliability, retaining only those with  $\alpha > 0.70$ .

The study focused on university and college students in Shah Alam who had participated in wellness tourism within the past 12 months, primarily Gen Z (aged 18–30), a growing yet underexplored segment in this field. A simple random sampling method was used to minimize selection bias and improve generalizability. Surveys were distributed both online (via Google Forms) and face-to-face at universities and wellness locations like spas and parks. Following Greene's rule, a minimum of 74 respondents was required; 87 completed responses were collected. These results reflect a well-represented group of young, single, and active students, aligning with the study's target profile. Prior to analysis, the dataset was thoroughly screened using SPSS (Version 27). No missing data were found due to mandatory responses in Google Forms and on-site supervision during manual collection. Outlier detection using box plots and Z-scores revealed no extreme outliers ( $Z > \pm 3.29$ ), and normality was confirmed through skewness and kurtosis values within acceptable ranges ( $\pm 2$  for skewness,  $\pm 7$  for kurtosis), justifying the use of parametric tests. The data analysis followed a structured approach aligned with the study's explanatory goals. First, reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha showed high internal consistency for all constructs: Education ( $\alpha = 0.852$ ), Entertainment ( $\alpha = 0.872$ ), Escapist ( $\alpha = 0.914$ ), and Tourist Engagement ( $\alpha = 0.828$ ). Second, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic and construct-level data. Third, mean score analysis revealed strong agreement across experiential dimensions, with all item means above 4.0. Lastly, multiple linear regression (MLR) was used to test the study's hypotheses: H1–H3 through individual regressions, and H4 via a combined model, evaluating the predictive power of educational, entertainment, and escapist experiences on tourist engagement.

## Results and Discussion

### *Frequency analysis*

A total of 87 valid responses were collected. The demographic profile of the respondents is summarized in *Table 1*. Most participants were between 23–26 years old (64.4%), female (63.3%), single (96.5%), and pursuing an undergraduate degree (65.6%). This profile supports the study’s focus on Gen Z students actively engaging in wellness tourism.

**Table 1.** Summary of frequency analysis table.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–22 years	16	18.4%
	23–26 years	56	64.4%
	27–30 years	12	13.8%
	31 and above	3	3.4%
Gender	Male	32	36.7%
	Female	55	63.3%
Marital Status	Single	84	96.5%
	Married	3	3.5%
Education Level	Diploma	24	27.5%
	Undergraduate	57	65.6%
	Master’s and above	6	6.9%

### **Normality assessment and reliability**

To assess normality, Skewness and Kurtosis values were examined for all variables. Acceptable ranges are  $\pm 2$  for skewness and  $\pm 7$  for kurtosis, following Byrne (2010). Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) values were calculated to assess the internal consistency of each construct. As per Nunnally (1975), a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is acceptable for exploratory research. All constructs in this study exceeded the threshold, indicating strong internal reliability (*Table 2*). All values fall within acceptable ranges, suggesting that the data are approximately normally distributed and suitable for parametric testing such as multiple linear regression (Hair et al., 2019). These results confirm that the items used for each construct are highly consistent in measuring the underlying dimension.

**Table 2.** Summary of normality and reliability output.

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Skewness	Kurtosis
Education	3	0.852	-0.583	-0.421
Entertainment	4	0.872	-0.673	-0.238
Escapist	4	0.914	-0.367	-0.765
Tourist Engagement	2	0.828	-0.312	-0.441

### **Descriptive statistics**

The descriptive statistics for the key study variables are summarized in *Table 3*. All mean scores were above 4.00, indicating high agreement across all experiential constructs and tourist engagement. The escapist dimension had the highest variability, indicating differences in how strongly students experienced detachment from routine life.

**Table 3.** Summary of descriptive statistics.

Construct	Item Example	Mean	Standard Deviation
Education	“The wellness experience made me	4.18	0.755

Entertainment	more knowledgeable about wellness” “I really enjoyed watching what others were doing”	4.31	0.782
Escapist	“I completely escaped the stress of daily life”	4.02	0.952
Tourist Engagement	“When interacting with the wellness destination intensely, I feel happy”	4.22	0.868

### *Inferential statistics & hypothesis testing*

To test the four hypotheses, multiple linear regression (MLR) was conducted using SPSS 27. The regression coefficients, R<sup>2</sup> values, and p-values are presented in *Table 4*. All predictors were statistically significant (p < 0.01), and the beta values indicate strong positive relationships between each experiential dimension and tourist engagement.

**Table 4.** Summary of regression analysis output and hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Predictor	β (Standardized Coeff.)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Education	0.668	8.281	< 0.01	Supported
H2	Entertainment	0.736	10.026	< 0.01	Supported
H3	Escapist	0.768	11.069	< 0.01	Supported
H4	Combined Model	0.817	13.058	< 0.01	Supported

This study set out to explore how wellness tourism experiences—specifically educational, entertainment, and escapist dimensions—affect tourist engagement among university students in Shah Alam, Malaysia. All four hypotheses were strongly supported by the data, providing new empirical insights into the psychological mechanisms driving Gen Z travelers’ interaction with wellness tourism offerings. The first key finding revealed that educational experiences had a strong, statistically significant influence on tourist engagement. These finding echoes prior work by Liu et al. (2023), who argued that learning and skill acquisition play a pivotal role in enriching tourism experiences. The ability of educational programs to foster cognitive involvement and stimulate curiosity is particularly effective among young adult tourists, who are often still in formal education and motivated by self-improvement. In the context of Shah Alam, where students are surrounded by academic institutions, wellness experiences that incorporate learning—such as nutrition seminars, guided wellness tours, or mindfulness workshops—align well with the cognitive preferences of the demographic. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that educational elements satisfy the psychological need for competence (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

The second key finding established that entertainment experiences also significantly predict tourist engagement. This supports previous findings by So et al. (2020), who emphasized the role of fun, enjoyment, and light-hearted activities in increasing emotional engagement. In the wellness tourism setting, entertainment experiences such as wellness-themed performances, laughter yoga, or spa-based social activities act as passive yet emotionally resonant triggers that build a sense of belonging and enjoyment. These align with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, which explains how external stimuli like entertainment trigger emotional states that result in approach behaviors—here, in the form of stronger tourist engagement. The third finding confirmed that escapist experiences were not only statistically significant but also the strongest predictor of tourist engagement among the three constructs. This finding

supports Quaye (2025), who identified psychological detachment and immersive participation as the most effective drivers of tourist well-being and loyalty. In the wellness tourism context, escapist experiences such as digital detox retreats, nature immersion, or spiritual escapes allow university students to psychologically distance themselves from academic stress, digital overload, and urban noise. These experiences cater to the SDT need for autonomy and provide opportunities for personal transformation and restoration. Lastly, the combined model of educational, entertainment, and escapist experiences explained 66.7% of the variance in tourist engagement, indicating a strong cumulative impact. This supports the assertion by Pine and Gilmore (1999) that the richness of a tourism experience lies in the integration of multiple experiential dimensions. Visitors are not just looking for one-off activities but seek immersive, multi-layered interactions that provide learning, enjoyment, and psychological renewal.

## **Conclusion**

This study advances tourism theory by extending the Experience Economy Framework to wellness tourism among Gen Z university students, confirming that educational, entertainment, and escapist experiences significantly predict tourist engagement. It also supports Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), showing that fulfilling psychological needs through wellness tourism drives intrinsic motivation and behavioral intention. As one of the first empirical studies on youth wellness tourists in Malaysia, it fills a critical gap in generational and regional tourism research. Practically, the study suggests that wellness providers should integrate educational components, light entertainment, and immersive escapist offerings tailored to student needs. Marketing should target Gen Z via digital storytelling and influencer content, while urban planners should incorporate wellness-friendly policies, such as green spaces and student-centered wellness events. Limitations include a small, localized sample, reliance on self-reported data, and a cross-sectional design that limits causal inference. Future research should adopt longitudinal, cross-cultural, and mixed-method approaches, explore digital wellness technologies, and expand constructs like perceived value and environmental awareness to build more comprehensive models. In conclusion, this research provides a robust, theory-driven framework for understanding youth engagement in wellness tourism, offering actionable insights for academics, service providers, and policymakers alike—especially in the context of post-pandemic tourism recovery.

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## **Conflict of interest**

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

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