

A Review of Research on Health Tourism Policies

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the worsening global aging trend and the expansion of sub-health populations, health tourism, as a new way of combining health and tourism, has gradually become a hot topic of concern for academia and policymakers. As the demand for health and wellness services grows globally, health tourism has emerged as a promising sector that bridges medical care, wellness, and leisure activities. This article systematically reviews the research of health and wellness tourism policies from 2000 to 2024, from a multidimensional perspective, combined with domestic and foreign policy practice experience, it sorts out the research status, evolution laws, and development trends of health and wellness tourism policies. By providing both theoretical support and practical inspiration, this research aims to guide policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers in advancing health tourism as a vital component of the global health and economic landscape and promote the lasting growth of health tourism.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In this day and age, the global aging trend is significant, as shown by the United Nations data. In 2022, there were 771 million people aged 65 years and older globally, 3 times more than the size in 1980 (258 million). The older population is projected to reach 994 million by 2030 and 1.6 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2022). The aging process in China is particularly rapid. According to data from the China National Bureau of Statistics, the population aged 65 and above in China will be 216.16 million in 2023, accounting for 15.4% of the total population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The aging population not only brings enormous pressure to social elderly care, medical security, etc., but also profoundly affects various aspects such as economic structure, labor market, and social consumption patterns.

In addition to the increase of the elderly population, the number of sub-healthy people worldwide is also constantly increasing. The demand for health maintenance and improvement among sub-healthy individuals is becoming increasingly urgent. Health tourism, as a new way of combining health and tourism, provides them with opportunities to relax and recuperate.

To foster the sustainable progress of health tourism,

the exploration of relevant policy design and practice is particularly important. The policy research on health tourism can be traced back to the mid to late 20th century. With the deep integration of tourism and the health industry, health tourism has gradually expanded from a single function of health treatment to a comprehensive industry covering multiple forms such as medical, cultural, and ecological health.

Taking medical tourism as an example, Kim Kyung Hee and Lee Yeon tae from South Korea pointed out that medical tourism started with medical travel for patients receiving treatment overseas, gradually expanded through a combination of medical and tourism medical tourism, and gradually expanded to health tourism for consuming health services. Since 2010, medical services are transforming into health tourism in the form of consuming medical services or health management services (Kim et al., 2021).

Governments around the world attempt to tap into the economic and social potential of this field through policy frameworks. For example, The advancement of the Healthy China initiative has propelled fresh possibilities for the growth of health tourism and contributed to its gradual maturation across the nation (Wang et al., 2023). This indicates that the guiding role of policies cannot be ignored in the development of this field, and the advanced enhancement of the health tourism sector is dependent on the backing and support of relevant policies.

1.2 Research Topic

This review provides a systematic review and exploration of the research on health and wellness tourism policies, covering a time range from the early 21st century to 2024, with a geographical focus on China and involving multiple regions around the world. Focus on the research topic of health tourism policies and search for a large amount of literature. After sorting and analyzing the selected literature, this thesis summarizes the current circumstance and challenges of research on health tourism policies from four specific issues: driving demand, integration of rural revitalization, challenges in policy practice, and future trends. Finally, the study has analyzed the research perspectives and development trends of health and wellness tourism policies, encompassing both domestic and international contexts.

Through detailed literature analysis and case studies, this review reveals the current development status and future tendency of health tourism on a global scale, in order to provide guideline and inspiration for academic research and policy formulation. At the same time, based on policy practice experience in different regions, this article proposes suggestions such as balancing economic benefits with social equity, ecological protection, emphasizing sustainable resource development, and improving service model innovation, providing theoretical support and practical inspiration for the sustainable improvement of health tourism.

2 RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCESSES

The time span for the literature search in this study is

Table 1. Criteria for screening literature

	Research theme	Research method	Literature type	Literature sources
Inclusion Criteria	Directly related to health and wellness tourism policies, focus on the title and abstract, including policy text analysis, policy influencing factors, policy implementation effects, and other aspects	Scientific and reliable, such as using quantitative analysis, qualitative research, case analysis and other methods	Academic papers, research reports, or official government documents	A high-quality journal recognized by the academic community, with a certain degree of influence and representativeness, and a large number of citations
Exclusion criteria	Literature unrelated to health and wellness	The analysis method is not	Nonacademic literature, such	Unknown journal with low citation count

from 2000 to 2024, covering both Chinese and English databases.

Using the CNKI database to collect Chinese literature, limiting the core journals of "Peking University Core" and "CSSCI", and using "health tourism" and "health tourism" as keywords, 169 preliminary screened articles were obtained; Narrowing down the scope and searching for 7 articles using the keyword 'health tourism policies'.

For each key literature, in the list of references, search for literature that is highly relevant to your research topic. Starting from known literature, continuously discover new and valuable literature. Through this snowball search method, gradually expand the scope and depth of the literature search, and discover the core literature and important research achievements in the research field. Further obtain 6 Chinese literature articles.

The concepts of "health tourism" and "wellness tourism" are commonly used in foreign countries, and it is generally believed that "health tourism" can be categorized into two types: "wellness tourism" and "medical tourism" (Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001; Jonas-Berki et al., 2014).

Conduct a search using Google Scholar and Web of Science English databases, with "wellness tourism policy", "medical tourism policy", and "health tourism policy" as the main keywords. Use advanced search in Google Scholar to obtain 101 articles; 673 articles were obtained on Web of Science, and 528 articles were ultimately obtained through limited screening of Database, Document Types, and Research Areas.

In the process of literature search, strict screening methods were adopted, as shown in Table 1.

	tourism policies, such as literature that solely studies tourism market development and scenic spot management without involving policy mechanisms	scientific, such as incomplete data collection, which leads to unreliable results	as news reports, commentary articles, etc	
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Finally, 40 articles were selected, including 27 foreign articles and 13 Chinese articles.

3 RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1 Analysis of the Motivation and Demand for Health and Wellness Tourism

The analysis of the motivation and demand for health tourism is the core link to understanding its rapid development. By sorting out the driving factors of the development of health tourism, not only can the deep logic of the formation of health tourism demand be revealed, but also theoretical support can be provided for industry policy optimization and service design.

The driving factors of the demand for health tourism present multidimensional and multi-level complexity.

First, the aging population is a major factor spurring the rise in demand for health and wellness tourism. With the increasing proportion of the elderly population worldwide, traditional medical and elderly care models are facing severe challenges. Research has found that the elderly population exhibits high heterogeneity in their health needs, and they are more inclined to choose tourism modes that can comprehensively meet their needs for healthcare, mental pleasure, and social interaction. The main decision-making factors for elderly people to choose health tourism services include functional independence, availability of natural therapies, geographical location, and climate conditions (Tomasović Mrčela et al., 2015). Mireia Ferri Sanz et al. use tourism as a social policy strategy to address the aging process, providing better quality of life and healthy aging for the elderly, reducing family burden, and lowering the cost of an aging society (Sanz et al., 2013).

Secondly, the integration of health and tourism demand is a significant background for the rise of health tourism. In recent years, people's pursuit of "health" has extended from single disease treatment to the maintenance and improvement of overall

physical and mental health. This shift in demand has led to health tourism becoming the intersection of the health and tourism industries. Alan Lukose et al. pointed out that patients and consumers' expectations for health services are shifting towards a more preventive and experiential direction, which is reflected in the demand for multiple service types in wellness tourism, such as forest therapy, hot spring therapy, and healthy diets (Lukose et al., 2024). Specifically, consumers from different cultural backgrounds and economies exhibit diversity in their demands. For example, in East Asia, traditional Chinese medicine health tourism and meditation therapy are highly regarded as forms of health and wellness; In Europe, the combination of hot springs and natural environments has become the mainstream way of recuperation. This phenomenon indicates that the formation of demand for health tourism is not only driven by health factors, but also deeply influenced by cultural cognition and local resource endowments.

In addition, socio-economic changes are also an important catalyst for the expansion of demand for health tourism. With the rise of the global middle class and consumption upgrading, more and more consumers see health as an investment rather than a simple consumption. Health tourism has received particular attention due to its ability to provide maintenance and appreciation of "health assets". For example, Lukose et al. found that some consumers choose health tourism not only to obtain medical or health services, but also to improve their quality of life, reduce occupational stress, and even delay aging through this approach. This internalized demand and the growing health awareness of consumers have formed a dual engine driving market expansion (Lukose et al., 2024).

However, the formation of demand for health tourism is also accompanied by certain barriers and challenges. Psychological and cultural barriers are the main reasons that hinder some consumers from participating in health tourism. Older people may have concerns about the safety of traveling, and consumers from different cultural backgrounds have varying levels of acceptance of wellness programs (Tomasović Mrčela et al., 2015). In addition, the issue of economic affordability still exists widely in some

regions. Although health tourism has shown high acceptance in developed markets, its high cost still limits its popularity in developing and underdeveloped regions, which directly affects the cross-regional expansion ability of health tourism.

3.2 The Practice and Application of China's Health and Wellness Tourism Policy in Rural Revitalization

The combination of health tourism and rural revitalization is one of the important development directions of China's health tourism policies in recent years. In recent years, this country has a series of supportive policies to promote the integration of health tourism and rural revitalization, such as the "Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022)", which clearly proposes the integration of agriculture, tourism, health and other industries to promote the diversified progression of rural economy; The "Healthy China 2030" planning outline positions health tourism as an important means to improve the overall health level of the population. These policies provide institutional guarantees and development guidance for the combination of health tourism and rural revitalization.

The development model of health tourism centered on rural areas usually relies on the natural ecology, cultural resources, and spatial characteristics of rural areas. Research has found that health tourism in rural areas mainly focuses on four typical models: one is the pastoral health tourism model developed based on agricultural resources, which meets the health needs of middle-aged and elderly tourists through agricultural experiences, healthy food supply, and other means; The second is a cultural health model based on local characteristic cultural resources; The third is a forest health model based on forest resources, which achieves physical and mental regulation through forest bathing, ecological therapy, and other methods; The fourth is to combine medical resources with a healthcare model that relies on traditional Chinese medicine and other resources to provide more specialized health services (Li and Tao, 2023; Zhang and Dong, 2022). These four models have expanded the service scenarios and industrial chain of health tourism, and provided new development ideas and practical paths for rural revitalization.

However, the practice of combining health tourism with rural revitalization is not without challenges. From an industrial perspective, the resource development and service models of health tourism in

many rural areas are still extensive, with problems such as homogeneous competition, insufficient innovation capabilities, and low resource utilization efficiency. In addition, health tourism requires specialized talent support, but rural areas face numerous difficulties in attracting and retaining versatile professionals (Li and Tao, 2023). From a social perspective, the large-scale development of health tourism projects may lead to issues such as land resource conflicts, ecological damage, and rural cultural alienation. Especially in some health tourism projects that focus on ecological resources, how to balance the relationship between economic benefits and ecological protection has become an important issue.

3.3 Experience Reference: Challenges in the Practice of Foreign Health Tourism Policies

On a global scale, wellness tourism, as the intersection of the health and tourism industries, has attracted widespread policy attention. However, policy practice in this field faces different challenges, which arise from both the rationality of policy design itself and the resource, cultural, and institutional barriers encountered during implementation. The practice and challenges of health tourism policies exhibit diverse characteristics and complexities in different regions and backgrounds.

Montalee Nooseisai et al. conducted research on the health inequality issues in Thailand's medical tourism industry, including talent loss from the public division to the private division, rising prices of medical products and services, and quality issues of public health facilities. They proposed that the government should take measures to reduce health inequality while enjoying the benefits of medical tourism, maintain the sustainable growth of Thailand's medical tourism industry, and avoid damaging people's healthcare (Nooseisai et al., 2017).

Jason Behrmann and Elise Smith from Canada studied the relationship between medical tourism and Canadian health policies, revealing current challenges and proposing future research directions. They found that the growing heterogeneity in the medical tourism industry, such as issues of organ transplantation and abortion, poses significant ethical and policy challenges (Jason and Elise, 2010). To this end, they proposed key research topics for the future development of medical tourism: examining the availability of emerging biomedical technologies and human tissues, determining the association between the medical tourism industry and population

vulnerability, and exploring how broad social factors force certain individuals to seek healthcare abroad. These studies provide a basis for policymakers to promote the sustainable development of the medical tourism industry.

Elham Rafighi et al. found that laws in the UK that limit healthcare access depending on immigration status may further endanger the well-being of disadvantaged people in the country (Rafighi et al., 2016). Iva Bulatovic and Katia Iankova found that the main obstacles to the development of medical tourism in the United Arab Emirates are high service costs, insufficient marketing initiatives and limited collaboration between healthcare providers and tourism services. The UAE government should establish a more effective healthcare supply network, tourism suppliers, and intermediaries (Bulatovic and Iankova, 2021).

The case studies of foreign health tourism policy practices indicate that policy design and implementation need to comprehensively consider diverse factors such as social equity, resource allocation, and market mechanisms to ensure the processive development of the health tourism industry. These experiences provide valuable references for China's health and wellness tourism policies. When formulating and implementing health and wellness tourism policies, China should avoid exacerbating resource allocation inequality and social inequality due to policy implementation. At the same time, policy coordination and cross-departmental cooperation should be strengthened to ensure the healthy development of the health tourism industry. In addition, China should actively explore international cooperation models, draw on advanced policy concepts and management experience from abroad, formulate more scientific and reasonable policies based on its own actual situation, and enhance its competitiveness in the international health and wellness tourism market.

3.4 Future Trends in Research on Health and Wellness Tourism Policies

Altaf Virani et al. found that the proportion of policy issues focused on in medical tourism research is comparatively low, and there are regional and disciplinary differences, mostly concentrated in specific areas, neglecting comprehensive governance and health systems. Therefore, it is called for policy scholars to participate more in medical tourism research, and health researchers should consider more clearly their understanding and solutions to the

challenges of medical tourism policies in their research (Virani et al., 2020).

Alan Lukose et al. indicated that the future of health tourism research should focus on addressing the global health crisis and promoting sustainable development. It is necessary to establish unified industry standards and explore new trends such as personalized and digital health services through comprehensive and sustainable methods, contributing to global health and well-being (Lukose et al., 2024).

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Research Summary

According to the research results, there is relatively little research on health and wellness tourism policies in China, which is in its infancy or development stage, while foreign research on health and wellness tourism policies is more mature and in-depth.

4.2 Research on Health Tourism Policies Presents Different Perspectives

Some studies emphasize the leading role of the government in health and wellness tourism, believing that policies are the core tool to guide industry development. Sang Yoon Kim compared the health tourism policies of South Korea and Japan, and pointed out that the government led model in South Korea performs better in institutionalized management, but has weaker flexibility; Japan, on the other hand, integrates resources through non-governmental organizations (NPOs), demonstrating high policy flexibility and local governance capabilities (Kim, 2021). Similarly, Guo Qiang et al. proposed in their exploration of ocean health tourism that the government can compensate for market failures by promoting resource integration and infrastructure construction through policy guidance, and unlocking market potential (Guo et al., 2023).

Another type of research tends to lean towards a market-driven perspective, emphasizing the optimization of resource allocation through market mechanisms. Research has found that under a market-oriented model, the role of policies is mainly reflected in subsidies, efficient resource allocation, and tourism brand building. For example, Li Qiao and Tao Li explored the activation effect of market capitalization on rural resources when studying the rural health and wellness industry in China. They believed that the

two-way flow of urban and rural resources can facilitate the sustainable development of the rural health and wellness industry (Li and Tao, 2023).

From a global perspective, health tourism policies also involve enhancing competitiveness in the international market. OECD Tourism Papers emphasize that grasping a nation's tourism competitiveness is crucial for policymakers and poses a significant challenge for professionals to supply evidence-based decision-making (Dupeyras and N, 2013). Emphasizing that policy formulation can, to some extent, affect a country's competitiveness in related industries. Research cases from Busan, the United Arab Emirates, and other regions have shown that by implementing refined policies such as visa facilitation, cross-border insurance cooperation, and cultural promotion, it is possible to attract international tourists and enhance the global competitiveness of the destination (Bulatovic and Iankova, 2021; Kim and Seo, 2023).

4.3 The Research on Health and Wellness Tourism Policies Shows a Gradually Evolving Trend with Changes in the Socio-Economic Background

With the deepening of research on health tourism, policy goals have gradually shifted from a single focus on health improvement to a diversified integration of ecological protection, cultural heritage, and economic development. Zhang Guanghai et al. found through analysis of policy texts that in recent years, China's health tourism policies have begun to integrate with ecological protection and rural revitalization strategies. Tourism styles focusing on health maintenance, including medical tourism, traditional Chinese medicine tourism, forest health, and hot spring health, are becoming more diverse (Zhang and Dong, 2022).

The evolution of policies is also reflected in the shift from macro frameworks to specific measures. Zhang Guanghai and Dong Yuelei pointed out through text quantification analysis that in recent years, policy goals have become clearer and measures have become more diverse (Zhang and Dong, 2022). Ran Wang and Songtao Geng suggest that the government develop policies to encourage healthcare institutions to adopt proactive privacy protection strategies, strengthen privacy protection in medical tourism, and promote development of the industry (Wang and Geng, 2024). Iranian scholars Farzaneh Nattagh et al. proposed a set of procedures for developing health tourism by constructing a four-

layer model with policy objectives as the core, guiding the development of medical tourism decisions in Iran, and providing specific recommendations based on each dimension (Nattagh et al., 2019).

4.4 Main Contributions of Existing Research

This review systematically reviews the current research status of health and wellness tourism policies, covering policy evolution from the mid to late 20th century to the present day. It deeply analyzes the multidimensional perspectives of health and wellness tourism policies, including the comparison between government-led and market-driven approaches, and how policies promote the integration of health and tourism industries.

Through a detailed review of the development process and specific practices of China's health and wellness tourism policies, especially in conjunction with the rural revitalization strategy, this article provides empirical evidence for understanding how policies can promote industrial development at the local level.

In addition, the summary of foreign health tourism policy practices, such as case studies in Thailand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates, provides valuable reference experience for China and contributes to the development of the industry in health tourism.

4.5 Main Shortcomings of Existing Research

Although this article has made important contributions to the research of health and wellness tourism policies, there are still some shortcomings. When analyzing various types of literature, some analyses lack in-depth exploration and critical thinking. For example, in the analysis of the motivations and demands for health tourism policies, multiple driving factors are listed, but there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the interrelationships and relative importance between these factors.

In addition, the richness and representativeness of overall data and cases are insufficient, especially when analyzing the practice and challenges of health tourism policies. The number of cases is relatively small and concentrated in the field of medical tourism, making it difficult to fully reflect the diversity and complexity of health tourism policy practices.

5 CONCLUSION

This article provides an organized review of the research status and development trends of health and wellness tourism policies, not only for the academic community, but also for policymakers and industry practitioners to point out the future development direction. In the context of the overlapping development of global health needs and tourism economy, the scientific design and effective implementation of health tourism policies will become an important guarantee for promoting sustainable socio-economic development.

The research on health tourism policies is crucial for fostering the long-term growth of the industry. Future research should further expand interdisciplinary perspectives, strengthen cross-border comparisons and micro mechanism exploration, and provide more comprehensive theoretical support and data basis for policy optimization. At the policy implementation level, it is necessary to explore specific paths for technological empowerment, regional collaboration, and social participation to advance the sustainable growth of health tourism.

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