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EXPLORING TOURIST PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF SPA TOURISM IN MILE CITY, CHINA: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

Mingjing Qu^{1*} 

¹Xi'an International University, School of Business, Xi'an, China; e-mail: paulqu911@gmail.com

Abstract: This qualitative study explores tourist perceptions and expectations of spa tourism in Mile City, China. The focus is on service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability practices. The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 participants to explore how these elements influence visitor satisfaction and decision-making. The findings highlight the critical role of cleanliness, therapist expertise, and ambiance in shaping overall satisfaction and revisit intentions. Visitors likewise place considerable importance on the incorporation of indigenous cultural components, including customary healing practices and ethnic decorations, which significantly enrich their spa experiences. Additionally, a distinct need for transparent and observable sustainability initiatives has arisen, even though existing practices remain constrained. By employing a grounded theory methodology, this research presents a novel conceptual framework to direct forthcoming investigations in spa tourism. This research offers vital insights for local spa enterprises and policymakers to enhance service offerings and align promotional strategies with modern traveler expectations, thereby promoting a sustainable and culturally immersive spa tourism industry in Mile City.

Keywords: spa tourism; cultural authenticity; sustainability practices; tourist perceptions; service quality

1. Introduction

Spa tourism has garnered traction due to the increasing desire for relaxation, and well-being. Mile City, China, is emerging as a spa tourism hub. Despite global growth, there is a lack of research focusing on experiential factors affecting tourist satisfaction and decision-making, especially in developing locations like Mile City. This study addresses this gap by exploring tourists' views and anticipations concerning service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability practices in spa tourism. Service quality impacts customer contentment and allegiance (Parasuraman et al., 1988), including factors like cleanliness, therapist expertise, and ambiance. Cultural authenticity enhances a destination's uniqueness (Ning, 2017). Sustainability practices ensure the long-term viability of tourism destinations, aligning with the growing global emphasis on responsible tourism (Rowlands, 1999). By exploring these constructs, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what modern spa tourists value, thus offering insights that go beyond the predominant focus on economic and demographic factors in existing literature.

*Corresponding author, e-mail: paulqu911@gmail.com

Existing literature on spa tourism emphasizes economic and demographic factors, yet often neglects subjective tourist experiences, particularly in Mile City. Voigt et al. (2011) examine motivations of wellness travelers, emphasizing the transformative aspects of spa encounters. Smith and Puczkó (2015) categorize health tourism, highlighting diverse spa offerings. Studies by Mijajlović et al. (2020) provide strategic insights into the factors influencing the competitiveness and business models of spa enterprises. Although Giritlioglu et al. (2014) and Lakicevic et al. (2023) have examined certain factors such as customer loyalty, service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability, especially in Mile City, these factors still remain not thoroughly investigated.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on three principal objectives: First, to evaluate tourists' perceptions of the quality of spa services in Mile City; Second, to understand tourists' expectations regarding the authenticity and cultural integration of spa services; Third, to assess the importance placed on sustainability practices by tourists engaging with spa tourism. Through the analysis of these constructs, the study contributes not only to the theoretical comprehension of spa tourism experiences, but also offers pragmatic insights for professionals within the industry.

This research provides actionable insights for spa providers and policymakers in Mile City by elucidating service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability from a tourist perspective. Improving service excellence, weaving authentic cultural elements into spa experiences, and adopting sustainable practices can elevate tourist contentment, draw a wider range of clientele, and fulfill the increasing need for responsible tourism. Consequently, this research not only enhances academic discussions but also carries real-world significance for elevating Mile City's standing in the competitive landscape of spa tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Spa tourism

Spa tourism significantly contributes to economic growth and job creation, attracting diverse tourist segments, and bolstering local economies (Frost et al., 2022). Carballo-Cruz et al. (2024) highlighted its economic and social value, encouraging investment in the sector. However, more nuanced analyses are needed to consider local contexts and infrastructure capacities. As societies adopt health-conscious lifestyles, the spa and wellness sector undergo considerable changes in consumer behavior, reflecting a growing trend in health tourism (Torres-Pruñonosa et al., 2022). Spa tourism also fosters cultural exchange and preserves local traditions by integrating communities into tourism activities, enhancing guests' cultural experiences (Suardana et al., 2022). Engaging community members in service delivery brings economic advantages and facilitates knowledge exchange between hosts and visitors. However, careful management is essential to prevent the commercialization and weakening of indigenous cultures, which could compromise the genuineness that entices tourists. China's tourism development has shifted geographically, with high concentration in the eastern and southern regions and a transition from polarized to equilibrium distribution (Zhang et al., 2020). The evolution of tourism spaces in historic quarters reflects postmodern consumption influences (Degen et al., 2022), and policies promoting border tourism emphasize economic growth through openness (Gao et al., 2022). These advancements demonstrate an intricate interaction among economic, cultural, and policy elements that influence the course of spa tourism in China.

2.2. Tourist expectations and perceptions

The anticipations of tourists are shaped by the caliber of products, the standard of services, socio-cultural and psychological determinants, the perception of the destination, and the fluctuations within the market. High-quality products, such as cleanliness and ambiance, enhance experiences (Akmal et al., 2023; Sztubecka et al., 2022). Psychological factors, like pre-visit anticipation, affect satisfaction, although loyalty may require more complex strategies (Thanikkad & Kumar, 2022). Social media and word-of-mouth play a key role in shaping tourist expectations, making it vital to align promotional messages with actual experiences (Zhang, 2022). Demographic differences also reveal varying preferences—men often value tangible benefits, while women seek peace and rejuvenation, and wealthier clients prefer long-term wellness benefits (de Lima et al., 2020). The spa industry must adapt to rapid changes, integrating wellness and medical services to ensure sustainable growth and customer satisfaction (Elrod et al., 2015).

2.3. Cultural authenticity in tourism

Cultural authenticity is a crucial element influencing tourist experiences, satisfaction levels, and behavioral intentions across various tourism categories, encompassing rural, ecotourism, heritage, and intangible cultural heritage tourism. Authentic experiences foster memorable interactions, place attachment, and sustainable tourism behaviors (Li & Wang, 2023; Sahabuddin et al., 2024). Preserving traditional cultural landscapes is vital for promoting sustainable tourism, but over-commercialization may degrade authenticity and lead to dissatisfaction (Liu et al., 2023). In ecotourism, authenticity affects value evaluations and revisit intentions, yet the relationship between authenticity and actual tourist inflows remains uncertain (Han & Bae, 2022). Perceived authenticity positively impacts tourists' destination image and satisfaction in both natural and cultural contexts, with different dimensions affecting experiences in varied ways (Stepchenkova et al., 2024; Zuo et al., 2024). Authenticity effects are moderated by tourists' cultural motivations, and prior knowledge. Community involvement is critical for maintaining authenticity, though current research lacks sufficient strategies to avoid cultural commodification (Lee et al., 2021; Poort et al., 2021). Balancing authenticity with integrity in historic cities is vital, but guidance on how to achieve this balance is still limited (Jigyasu, 2022).

2.4. Sustainability in tourism

Sustainable practices in spa tourism aim to balance environmental, economic, social-cultural, and institutional aspects. Community-led tourism and effective policy implementation are vital for sustainability, as is engaging local communities in strategic development (Bishwokarma et al., 2023). During COVID-19, tourism companies highlighted the value of leveraging local resources, but the sustainability of post-crisis adaptations remains uncertain (Baiocco & Paniccia, 2023; Tiwari & Thakur, 2021). Macro-level initiatives have shown positive impacts on long-term success, though their translation to micro-level practices remains underexplored (Nagendrakumar et al., 2022). The concept of sustainable tourist journeys promotes responsible behaviors at every stage of tourism, with stakeholders' roles requiring further analysis in different contexts (Madanaguli et al., 2023; Pitakaso et al., 2024). Luxury spas have adopted energy-efficient and waste reduction measures, while the adaptive reuse

of spa towns supports both cultural preservation and sustainable growth (Seidel et al., 2021; Sztubecka et al., 2022). Although these sustainable approaches emphasize a holistic perspective, challenges in implementation across different contexts remain insufficiently addressed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study area

The Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture nestles in the enchanting southeastern lands of Yunnan Province, China, embraced by Wenshan to the east, Kunming to the north, Yuxi to the west, and Vietnam to the south. Mile, a city at the county level, is positioned in the northern area of the Autonomous Prefecture and encompasses 12 townships (Sun et al., 2020). The total water resources in Mile City amount to 790 million m³, with an annual exploitable volume of hot spring resources estimated at approximately six million m³ (Mile Municipal People's Government Office, 2022).

3.2. Data collection

Mile City is known for its burgeoning spa tourism industry, provided an ideal context for examining service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is often employed to target specific populations of interest (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). Data collection continued until saturation was reached, where new data no longer provided fresh insights (Blaikie, 2018). Purposive sampling involved selecting specific individuals based on predefined criteria, aiming to include experts or elites in a particular field (López, 2023). In this study, purposive sampling was used to ensure a diverse representation of tourist demographics, including age, gender, native place, and previous spa tourism experiences (frequency of visit). Participants were recruited from spa centers (recruitment consent forms were furnished to spa centers for distribution among clients and the clients were briefed by staff about the study and encouraged to partake), as well as hotels and resorts (hotel concierges and front desk personnel received training to present the study to guests during check-in or throughout their stay, and information consent forms were made available at the front desk), and local tourism offices (tourism office staff provided information about the study to visitors and distributed consent forms).

To ensure a diverse and comprehensive sample, 18 participants (tourists) were selected by the following criteria (see Table 1):

1. *Recent Spa Experience*—Only tourists who had experienced spa services in Mile City within the past three months were eligible to participate. This ensured that their perceptions and experiences were current and relevant.
2. *Various Demographics*—Measures were taken to enlist individuals from different age groups, genders, native places, and socioeconomic statuses in order to encompass a broad spectrum of viewpoints.
3. *Consent with Awareness*—Participants were required to be willing to offer informed consent, recognizing their comprehension of the study's objectives, methodologies, and their entitlements as participants.

Table 1. Participants' information

Code	Age	Gender	Native place (Province)	Frequency of visit	Occupation	Interview period (min)
V1	23	Male	Yunnan	2	Student	40
V2	21	Female	Yunnan	2	Student	41
V3	26	Male	Sichuan	3	Student	44
V4	28	Male	Sichuan	2	Student	42
V5	25	Female	Sichuan	3	Student	41
V6	34	Male	Guizhou	5	Businessman	45
V7	36	Male	Guangxi	4	Businessman	47
V8	39	Male	Guizhou	4	Businessman	44
V9	42	Male	Sichuan	6	Businessman	48
V10	72	Male	Sichuan	10+	Retired	50
V11	61	Male	Sichuan	10+	Retired	49
V12	66	Female	Sichuan	7	Retired	46
V13	63	Female	Guizhou	7	Retired	43
V14	62	Female	Jilin	10+	Retired	44
V15	65	Female	Zhejiang	5	Retired	41
V16	66	Male	Guizhou	10+	Retired	48
V17	70	Male	Chongqing	8	Retired	45
V18	68	Male	Chongqing	8	Retired	47

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather comprehensive and nuanced insights into tourist perceptions and expectations regarding spa tourism in Mile City. This qualitative approach involved a dynamic dialogue guided by a flexible interview protocol with probes and follow-up questions (Knott et al., 2022), allowing for open-ended exploration of thoughts and experiences (Buys et al., 2022). This method was appropriate for investigating the complex interaction among service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability practices.

The examination was conducted in two stages between December 2023 and February 2024. Initially, researchers undertook on-site observations at spa centers, hotels/resorts, and tourism offices in Mile City, recording detailed field notes on human behavior and interactions (Smiley, 2015). Subsequently, in January and February 2024, scholars conducted in-depth interviews lasting 40–50 minutes each, ensuring high-quality data. Moderate incentives, such as gift cards or spa discounts, were ethically provided to encourage participation without undue influence.

The interview guide was developed following Kallio et al. (2016) five-step process, ensuring both theoretical and practical relevance. Key concepts—service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability—were derived from recognized frameworks including SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and the triple bottom line paradigm (Rowlands, 1999). Concepts of authenticity from Ning (2017) were also incorporated. A pilot test with two participants ensured clarity and relevance, with refinements made based on feedback. This approach aligns with Turner (2010) guidelines for effective qualitative protocols, ensuring the interview questions are robust and elicited in-depth responses. Each topic was investigated by means of a sequence of unstructured inquiries, enabling individuals to articulate their perspectives without constraint and furnish detailed, descriptive information (Table 2).

Table 2. Interview guide

Main categories	Sub-categories	Interview questions (samples)
Service quality	Cleanliness	Can you describe your impressions of the cleanliness of the spa facilities?
		How important is cleanliness to your overall satisfaction with spa services?
	Therapist expertise	How would you evaluate the expertise and professionalism of the therapists?
		Can you recall a specific experience where the therapist's skills significantly impacted your spa experience?
	Ambiance	What aspects of the spa's ambiance (e.g., light, music, decor) contributed to your relaxation and enjoyment?
How does the ambiance of a spa influence your decision to revisit or recommend it to others?		
Overall satisfactions	Overall, how satisfied were you with the spa services you received?	
	What specific factors contributed most to your satisfaction or dissatisfaction?	
Cultural authenticity	Importance of cultural elements	How important is the inclusion of cultural elements in your spa experience?
		Can you give examples of cultural features (e.g., traditional therapies, local decor) that enhanced your spa experiences?
	Perceptions of authenticity	How do cultural elements in spa services influence your perception of authenticity?
		In what ways do you think authenticity impacts your overall spa experience?
	Overall experience	Can you describe a spa experience where cultural authenticity played a key role in your satisfaction?
How do you feel about the balance between modern spa amenities and traditional cultural elements?		
Sustainability practices	Awareness of sustainability practices	What sustainability practices (e.g., water conservation, use of natural products) were you aware of during your spa visit?
		How informed do you feel about the spa's efforts towards sustainability?
	Expectations for sustainability	What are your expectations regarding environmental practices in spa tourism?
		How important are social and economic sustainability practices (fair wages, community involvement) to you?
	Impact on patronage decisions	How do sustainability practices influence your decision to choose a particular spa?
Would you be willing to pay a premium for spa services that prioritize sustainability? Why or why not?		

3.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the grounded theory approach (GTA) to develop a theoretical framework of sustainability in spa tourism through tourist perceptions and expectations. GTA enables the formulation of hypotheses through systematic data collection and examination of the observed phenomenon. GTA involves a systematic process of data collection and analysis. It focuses on coding to derive theories grounded in the data (Sosa-Díaz & Valverde-Berrocoso, 2022). GTA's emphasis distinguishes it from the deductive nature of content analysis and the descriptive nature of phenomenology, making GTA a powerful tool for developing new theoretical frameworks in qualitative research (Urcia, 2021).

Grounded theory data analysis involves several key steps (Table 3). Initially, researchers engage in open coding to categorize data, followed by axial coding to establish connections between categories, and finally, selective coding to identify core categories (Rêgo et al., 2023). Throughout the process, constant comparison and theoretical sampling are essential, allowing for iterative data collection and analysis to develop a conceptual understanding situated in the study context (Kharkova et al., 2022).

Table 3. The key steps of grounded theory data analysis

Step	Data analysis process
Open coding	Interview transcripts were systematically scrutinized to ascertain fundamental concepts and categories pertaining to service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability practices. The procedure entailed deconstructing the information into distinct components and rigorously analyzing these sections to pinpoint recurrent themes and patterns.
Axial coding	The establishment of subcategories and higher-level themes involved an examination of the connections among the designated categories to construct subcategories. This stage was intended to establish connections between categories at the level of properties and dimensions, thereby enhancing comprehension of the interrelationship between various elements of service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability.
Selective coding	The ultimate stage comprised the integration of the categories to construct a coherent theoretical framework. This procedure amalgamated the data into a cohesive model that elucidated the interaction among service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability in spa tourism.

3.4. Validity and reliability

To augment the robustness and dependability of the results, triangulation was utilized through contrasting interview data with observational notes and pertinent documents. This multifaceted strategy guaranteed a thorough comprehension of the research setting (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Individuals were encouraged to assess the results to verify precision and reliability. This stage encompassed validating the construed data with the interviewees to affirm that their perspectives and encounters were faithfully portrayed.

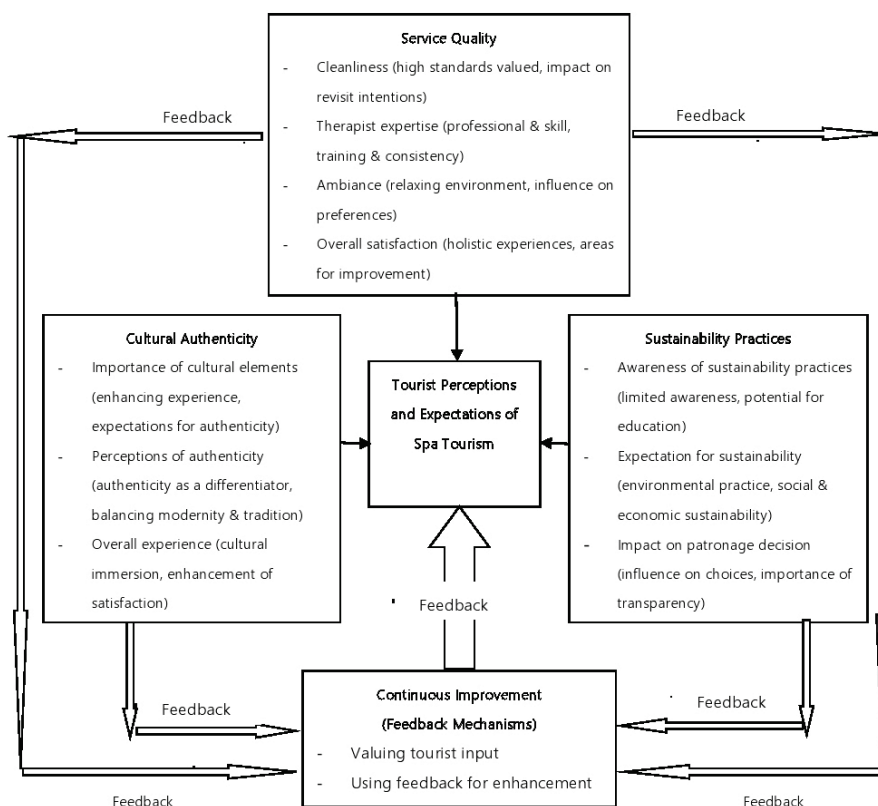


Figure 1. The conceptual model of tourist perceptions and expectations of spa tourism

According to the grounded theory, this study constructed a conceptual model of tourist perceptions and expectations of spa tourism, shown in Figure 1. Findings indicate that achieving sustainable spa tourism in Mile City requires improving service quality, enhancing cultural authenticity, and implementing visible sustainability practices. Cleanliness, therapist expertise, and ambiance are critical in shaping tourists' satisfaction and revisit intentions. Tourists value the integration of local cultural elements, enriching their spa experiences. Visible sustainability practices, though currently limited, are increasingly important. By addressing these areas, spas can better meet expectations, promote repeat visits, and contribute to sustainable local tourism development. The study also emphasizes the importance of continuous feedback to align with evolving expectations.

4. Results and discussion

This research examines tourists' perceptions and expectations of spa tourism in Mile City, China, with a focus on three primary areas: service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability practices. Utilizing a qualitative research approach that incorporates in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 participants and comprehensive field observations, the results offer a nuanced comprehension of the variables that impact tourist experiences and decisions within this distinctive environment.

4.1. Service quality

4.1.1. Cleanliness

Tourists consistently emphasized the importance of cleanliness in spa facilities, highlighting its significant impact on their satisfaction and comfort. They noted that high standards of cleanliness are crucial and directly affect their decisions to revisit or recommend a spa. Key observations include:

- *High standards valued*—Instances of exceptional cleanliness were often highlighted as reasons for positive reviews and recommendations. For example, interviewees V6, V7, V8, and V9 stated: “We frequently come here because it’s very clean and suitable for hosting high-end clients. It certainly meets our own standards for cleanliness as well.”
- *Impact on revisit intentions*—Several respondents indicated that the cleanliness of a spa influences their decision to revisit or recommend the spa to others. Clean and properly maintained amenities play a crucial role in fostering a perception of credibility and dependability. For example, participants V1, V3, V10, V14, and V17 mentioned: “Our acquaintances recommended this establishment to us due to its cleanliness and adherence to hygiene standards, thus instilling a profound sense of assurance within us. Therefore, whenever we need it, we come here first.”

4.1.2. Therapist expertise

The expertise and professionalism of therapists were critical factors in shaping tourist satisfaction. Participants emphasized that skilled therapists enhance their spa experiences, while inconsistencies in therapist proficiency can detract from satisfaction. Insights shared include:

- *Professionalism and skill*—Participants recalled specific experiences where highly skilled therapists significantly improved their spa visits. For example, participants V10, V11, V14, and V16 proposed: “My old friends and I have been coming here for spa treatments for over ten years, mainly because we can always find skilled therapists here. Many of our issues, like back pain and leg pain, can be alleviated through their massages.”
- *Training and consistency*—Variations in the skill levels of therapists were noted, suggesting a need for consistent training and certification standards to maintain high service quality. For example, interviewees V13, V17, and V18 stated: “This visit was a bit disappointing. The therapist who used to massage me has left. The new therapist’s skills are decent, but still not up to the previous standard. My friend encountered the same issue. We hope the new therapists can quickly improve their skills.”

4.1.3. Ambiance

Elements such as lighting, music, and decor were frequently mentioned as crucial to creating a relaxing and enjoyable spa experience. Tourists expressed that a well-designed ambiance enhances their perception of quality and luxury, influencing their preferences. The following points were highlighted:

- *Relaxing environment*—A well-designed ambiance contributes to the overall perception of quality and luxury. For example, participants V8 and V9 discussed: “The place has brought great satisfaction to both my clients and me. The spa pool is halfway up the mountain, offering a beautiful and private natural setting.”

- *Influence on preferences*—The ambiance was often a deciding factor for tourists when choosing a spa, with preferences leaning towards environments that provide a sense of escape and tranquility. For example, participants V1, V2, V3, V4, and V5 argued “This hotel is the most modern and fits our young population’s taste within our budget. We particularly like the interior decor, especially the impressive aromatherapy.”

4.1.4. Overall satisfaction

Overall satisfaction was impacted by a blend of elements, encompassing service quality, cleanliness, atmosphere, and the proficiency of the therapists. Tourists associated high satisfaction levels with spas excelling in these areas and suggested improvements where needed. Observations include:

- *Holistic experience*—Spas that demonstrated excellence across various domains were associated with elevated levels of satisfaction.
- *Areas for improvement*—Recommendations for improvement encompassed augmenting the uniformity of service excellence, modernizing amenities, and guaranteeing the presence of proficient therapists.

4.2. Cultural authenticity

4.2.1. Importance of cultural elements

Participants valued the inclusion of cultural elements such as traditional therapies and local decor. They believed these elements enhance the authenticity and uniqueness of the spa experience and expressed a desire for more. Key insights are:

- *Enhancing experiences*—These elements were seen as enhancing the authenticity and uniqueness of the spa experience. For example, interviewees V12 and V13 stated: “We come from other provinces, and Mile is the second largest Yi ethnic gathering place in Yunnan. The Yi cultural decorations in the spa make us feel very special.”
- *Expectations for authenticity*—Tourists expressed a desire for more authentic cultural experiences, suggesting that spas incorporate more local traditions and practices into their services. For example, interviewees V15, V17, and V18 proposed: “Yunnan’s ethnic minority medicine is very famous. If the spa could combine local Yi herbal medicine with their treatments, I believe more people would come here for both health and tourism.”

4.2.2. Perceptions of authenticity

Authentic cultural elements were perceived as differentiators that set Mile City's spas apart from more generic spa experiences. Participants appreciated a balance between authenticity and modern amenities, which enhanced their connection to the destination. Notable perspectives include:

- *Authenticity as a differentiator*—Authenticity contributed to a deeper connection with the destination. For example, participants V3, V4, and V5 mentioned: “While enjoying the spa, we can also experience authentic ethnic minority cuisine, prepared by local minority chefs.”
- *Balancing modernity and tradition*: While authenticity was valued, participants also appreciated modern amenities. A balanced integration of traditional and contemporary elements was seen as ideal. For example, participants V6, V7, and V8 argued: “Besides the spa and ethnic culture, what surprised us the most is that this place has the largest winery in Yunnan. So, the wine bath has become the spa's signature treatment.”

4.2.3. Overall experience

Participants noted that cultural immersion enhanced their overall satisfaction, particularly among those seeking unique and culturally immersive experiences. They felt that:

- *Cultural immersion*—Positive experiences were often linked to spas that successfully integrated cultural authenticity into their services. These experiences were described as enriching and memorable.
- *Enhancement of satisfaction*—Cultural authenticity was seen as enhancing overall satisfaction, particularly among tourists seeking unique and culturally immersive experiences.

4.3. Sustainability practices

4.3.1. Awareness of sustainability practices

There was limited awareness among tourists about the sustainability practices of the spas they visited. Participants expressed a desire for more visibility and education regarding these efforts. Key findings include:

- *Limited awareness*—Participants expressed a desire for more visible and communicated sustainability efforts. For example, interviewees V1, V7, V10, and V15 declared: “We know that sustainable development is being advocated globally, but we don’t have much specific knowledge about what spas should do.”
- *Potential for education*—Educational initiatives within spas could raise awareness about sustainability practices, encouraging tourists to adopt more sustainable behaviors. For example, interviewees V2, V8, and V13 determined: “The spa and hotels here almost everywhere have signs promoting water conservation and some environmental protection slogans.”

4.3.2. Expectations for sustainability

Tourists had high expectations for environmental practices, including water conservation, use of natural products, and waste management. They considered these practices essential for sustainable spa tourism and valued socially responsible actions. Insights include:

- *Environmental practices*—These practices were seen as essential for sustainable spa tourism. For example, participants V3, V4, V7, and V9 argued: “The handmade soap recommended by the spa is very useful and has zero environmental pollution. I also noticed that the towels are made from recyclable and eco-friendly materials.”
- *Social and economic sustainability*—Fair wages for staff and community involvement were also important to tourists, who valued socially responsible practices. For example, participants V12, V17, and V18 mentioned: “We think the cultural environment here is very good. Whether it’s the staff at the spa or the local people, they are all very friendly.”

4.3.3. Impact on patronage decisions

Sustainability practices influenced the decision to choose particular spas, with some participants willing to pay a premium for environmentally and socially responsible services. Transparency about these efforts was important, as tourists wanted to understand their contributions to broader goals. Observations are:

- *Influence on choices*—For example, interviewees V6, V7, V8, and V9 stated: “We chose the spa because many of its products are made from green and eco-friendly materials.

Although it's expensive, knowing that we are contributing to environmental protection and sustainable development makes it worthwhile.”

- *Importance of transparency*—Transparency about sustainability efforts was important to tourists, who wanted to know how their choices contributed to broader environmental and social goals. For example, interviewees V6 and V7 mentioned: “We are very satisfied with the spa’s promotion of sustainable development because we clearly understand how we are contributing.”

4.4. Continuous improvement

4.4.1. Feedback mechanisms

Tourists appreciated opportunities to provide feedback and saw it as a sign of a spa’s commitment to continuous improvement. They valued when their input was solicited and acted upon, enhancing satisfaction and loyalty. Key points include:

- *Valuing tourist input*—Effective feedback mechanisms can enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty.
- *Using Feedback for enhancement*—Spas that actively used feedback to make improvements were viewed more favorably. Participants noted positive changes in spas that regularly solicited and acted on guest input.

5. Conclusion

This study delves into the perceptions and expectations of tourists regarding spa tourism in Mile City, China, with a focus on service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability practices. The findings highlight the paramount importance of cleanliness, therapist expertise, and ambiance in determining overall tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions. Tourists valued the integration of local cultural elements, such as traditional therapies and ethnic decorations, which significantly enhance their spa experiences. While current sustainability practices are limited in visibility, there is a clear demand among tourists for more robust and transparent environmental and social sustainability measures.

5.1. Recommendations

To achieve sustainable spa tourism in Mile City, it is essential to:

- Maintain high standards of cleanliness and hygiene to ensure tourist satisfaction and foster positive reviews;
- Invest in the consistent training of therapists to ensure a high level of professionalism and skill;
- Enhance the spa ambiance with thoughtful decor, lighting, and music to create a relaxing environment;
- Incorporate authentic cultural elements and traditional therapies to enrich the tourist experience; and
- Implement visible and effective sustainability practices, including environmental conservation efforts and socially responsible initiatives.

5.2. Theoretical implications

This research enriches the current body of knowledge by presenting a holistic exploration of how service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainability intersect to influence tourists'

perspectives and anticipations. The conceptual model developed through grounded theory offers a framework for future research on spa tourism and sustainable tourism practices.

5.3. Practical implications

For spa operators and policymakers in Mile City, the findings provide actionable insights into improving service offerings to meet modern travelers' expectations. Improving service quality, embracing cultural authenticity, and implementing sustainable methods have the potential to elevate tourists' contentment, encourage return trips, and generate favorable recommendations, thereby fostering the sustainable growth of the regional tourism sector.

5.4. Limitations and future studies

The constraints of the research encompass a limited sample size and the emphasis on a solitary geographical area, potentially impacting the applicability of the results. Future research should expand the sample size and include diverse locations to validate and refine the conceptual model. Furthermore, longitudinal studies may offer a more profound understanding of the extended consequences of enhanced service quality, cultural authenticity, and sustainable practices on tourists' behavior and the sustainability of the industry. By addressing these areas, spas in Mile City can better align with tourist expectations, foster sustainable tourism practices, and contribute to the overall growth and development of the local economy.

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