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**EXTERNAL FACTORS, INTERNAL FACTORS, AND  
WELLNESS TOURISTS' BEHAVIORAL INTENTION  
TO UNDERDEVELOPED REGIONS IN SOUTHERN  
SHAANXI, CHINA**



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## ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the impact of external factors (marketing mix, government influence, subjective norms) and internal factors (motivation, attitude, perceived behavioral control) on wellness tourists' intention in underdeveloped regions of Southern Shaanxi, China. This study adopted a quantitative research approach to test the proposed framework. Nine cities within and around Shaanxi Province were selected using probability sampling techniques, specifically multi-stage cluster sampling. Systematic sampling was employed to distribute electronic questionnaires, resulting in the collection of 508 valid responses. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling. The findings of Confirmatory Factor Analysis demonstrated good fit statistics:  $\chi^2=1508.06$  ( $df=1015$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),  $\chi^2/df=1.496$ , CFI=0.967, TLI=0.965, RMSEA=0.031 and SRMR=0.0729 with adequate convergent and discriminant validity, and construct reliability. The results showed that among the external factors, only the marketing mix positively affects wellness tourists' behavioral intention ( $\beta=0.16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Among the internal factors, motivation ( $\beta=0.155$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), attitude ( $\beta=0.274$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and perceived behavioral control ( $\beta=0.323$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) each positively affect wellness tourists' behavioral intention. Furthermore, external factors positively affect internal factors, except for the influence of the marketing mix on perceived behavioral control, which was insignificant ( $\beta=0.079$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). The study also finds that most internal factors significantly mediate the relationship between external factors and wellness tourists' behavioral intention. However, perceived behavioral control does not significantly mediate the relationship between the marketing mix and wellness tourists' intention ( $\beta=0.025$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). The findings of this study not only advance the theoretical framework of wellness tourism but also provide actionable guidance for managing and marketing wellness tourism destinations in underdeveloped mountainous areas. The implication of these insights is that policymakers and tourism stakeholders can adopt strategies to optimize investments and better align supply with market demand, thereby fostering sustainable growth in the wellness tourism sector.





## FAKTOR LUARAN, FAKTOR DALAMAN, DAN KECENDERUNGAN TINGKAH LAKU PELANCONGAN KESEJAHTERAAN TERHADAP KAWASAN KURANG MAJU DI SELATAN SHAANXI, CHINA

### ABSTRAK

Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji kesan faktor luaran (campuran pemasaran, pengaruh kerajaan, norma subjektif) dan faktor dalaman (motivasi, sikap, tanggapan kawalan tingkah laku) terhadap kecenderungan tingkah laku pelancongan kesejahteraan di wilayah terbelakang di Selatan Shaanxi, China. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan penyelidikan kuantitatif untuk menguji rangka kerja yang dicadangkan. Sembilan bandar dalam dan sekitar Wilayah Shaanxi telah dipilih menggunakan teknik pensampelan kebarangkalian, khususnya pensampelan kelompok pelbagai peringkat. Pensampelan sistematik digunakan untuk mengedarkan soal selidik elektronik, menghasilkan pengumpulan 508 maklum balas yang sah. Analisis data dijalankan menggunakan Model Persamaan Struktur. Penemuan Analisis Faktor Pengesahan menunjukkan statistik kesesuaian yang baik:  $\chi^2=1508.06$  ( $df=1015$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),  $\chi^2/df=1.496$ , CFI=0.967, TLI=0.965, RMSEA=0.031 dan SRMR=0.0729 dengan kesahan konvergen dan diskriminan serta kebolehpercayaan konstruk yang mencukupi. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa di antara faktor luaran, hanya campuran pemasaran yang memberi kesan positif kepada kecenderungan tingkah laku pelancongan kesejahteraan ( $\beta=0.16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Di antara faktor dalaman, motivasi ( $\beta=0.155$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), sikap ( $\beta=0.274$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), dan tanggapan kawalan tingkah laku ( $\beta=0.323$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) masing-masing memberi kesan positif kepada kecenderungan tingkah laku pelancongan kesejahteraan. Tambahan pula, faktor luaran memberi kesan positif kepada faktor dalaman, kecuali pengaruh campuran pemasaran terhadap tanggapan kawalan tingkah laku, yang tidak signifikan ( $\beta=0.079$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa kebanyakan faktor dalaman secara signifikan menjadi perantara hubungan antara faktor luaran dan kecenderungan tingkah laku pelancongan kesejahteraan. Walau bagaimanapun, tanggapan kawalan tingkah laku tidak menjadi perantara signifikan antara hubungan campuran pemasaran dan kecenderungan tingkah laku pelancongan kesejahteraan ( $\beta=0.025$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). Penemuan kajian ini bukan sahaja memajukan rangka teori pelancongan kesejahteraan tetapi juga memberikan panduan yang boleh dilaksanakan untuk pengurusan dan pemasaran destinasi pelancongan kesejahteraan di kawasan pergunungan yang agak mundur. Implikasi daripada penemuan ini adalah bahawa pembuat dasar dan pihak berkepentingan pelancongan boleh mengguna pakai strategi untuk mengoptimumkan pelaburan dan menyesuaikan penawaran dengan permintaan pasaran, seterusnya memupuk pertumbuhan mampan dalam sektor pelancongan kesejahteraan.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMOS	Analysis of Moment Structure
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
CAIC	Consistent Akaike Information Criterion
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CR	Construct Reliability
df	Degree of Freedom
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
ENDO	Endogenous Variable
EXO	Exogenous Variable
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOF	Goodness-of-Fit
MI	Modification Indices
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
SRMR	Standardized Root Mean Square Residual
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Index
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor





## LIST OF APPENDIXES

- A Issues and Suggestions from The Expert's Review
- B The Analysis of the Instrument's Content Validity using the Content Validity Index (CVI)
- C Respondent Profile (Pilot study)
- D Descriptive Statistics (Pilot Study)
- E Final Questionnaire
- F Analysis of Initial Data Screening
- G Curve Estimation
- H Assessment of Common Method Bias
- I Primary Individual CFA of Marketing Mix
- J Primary Individual CFA for Motivation
- K Primary Individual CFA for Attitude
- L Primary Individual CFA for Perceived Behavioral Control
- M Primary Individual CFA for Behavioral Intention





## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction



Underdeveloped regions, characterized by complex terrain, remote locations, and weak infrastructure, stand in stark contrast to developed urban areas (Guo & Liu, 2022; Vaishar & Št'astná, 2023). Despite their abundant natural resources, such as forests, minerals, and water, these regions face significant challenges in achieving sustainable development due to geographical and technological constraints (Danzi & Figini, 2023). This contradiction highlights the urgent need to transform natural resource advantages into drivers of economic growth. Wellness tourism, as an emerging form of tourism, offers a potential solution by leveraging the unique natural and cultural resources of underdeveloped regions to meet the growing demand for physical and mental well-being (Kazakov & Oyner, 2021).





This study aims to examine the key factors influencing tourists' intentions to participate in wellness tourism in underdeveloped regions of China. By integrating the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory, social influence theory, and theory of planned behavior, the research examines the impact of external factors (e.g., marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) and internal factors (e.g., motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control) on wellness tourists' behavioral intentions. The findings not only enrich the theoretical framework of wellness tourism behavioral intentions but also provide practical insights for tourism managers and policymakers. Tourism managers should focus on optimizing the marketing mix to enhance tourist engagement, while policymakers can implement targeted interventions to promote the sustainable development of wellness tourism.



This chapter provides a brief explanation of the research. Following the introduction, Section 1.2 presents the background of the study, while Section 1.3 specifies the problem statement. Section 1.4 outlines the research objectives, and Section 1.5 lists the research questions. Section 1.6 details the research hypotheses, Section 1.7 introduces the theoretical framework, and Section 1.8 introduces the conceptual framework. Section 1.9 defines the operational constructs used in this research, Section 1.10 addresses the limitations, and Section 1.11 highlights the importance of the research. Finally, Section 1.12 provides a summary.





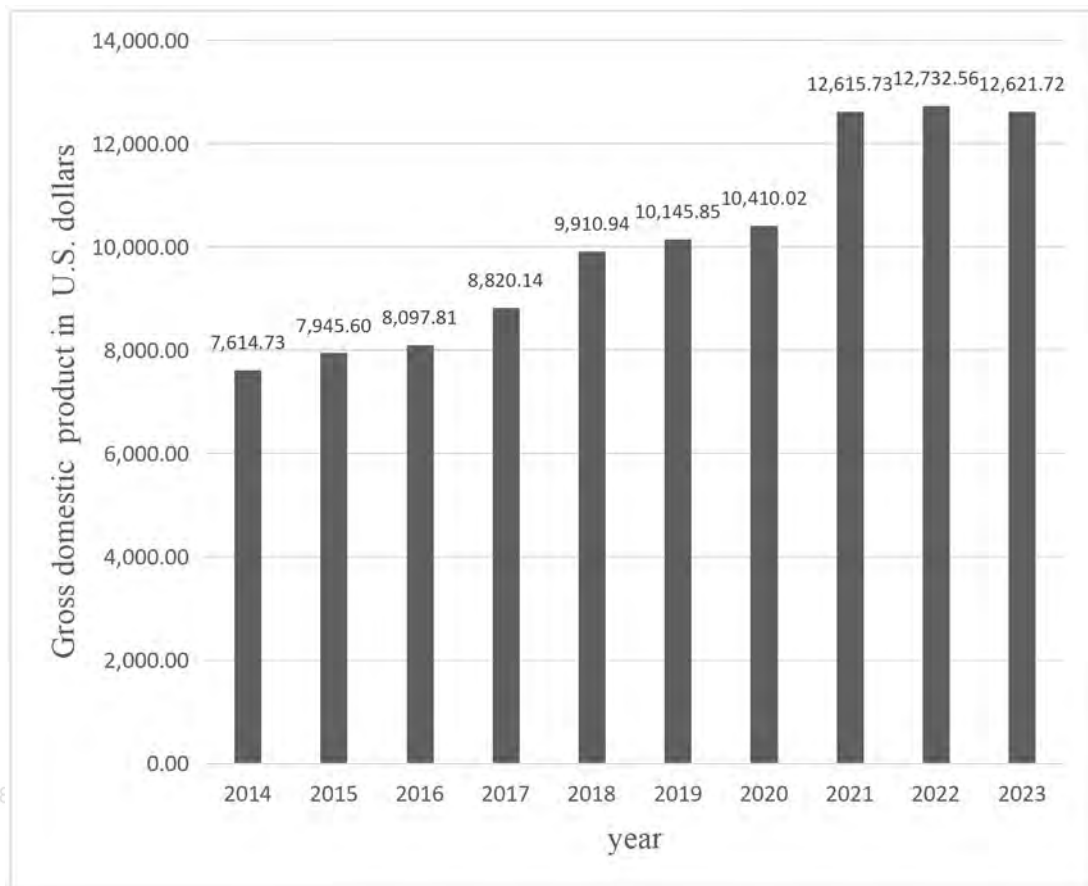
## 1.2 Background Research

The post-industrial era and technological progress have freed human beings from strenuous physical labor, leading to a new challenge: how to spend leisure time (Yu et al., 2019). One choice many people make is to travel to places outside their accustomed environment (Dimitrios et al., 2006; Song & Li, 2008). As such, tourism has become a suitable option for leisure time. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) suggests that as the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita increases, tourism evolves through four stages: sightseeing tourism, leisure tourism, vacation tourism, and wellness tourism (Wang et al., 2020). When a country's GDP per capita reaches USD8,000, tourism enters the wellness stage (Song & Li, 2008; Wang et al., 2020). In 2023, China's GDP per capita was approximately USD12621.72 (CEIC Statista, 2024), implying that Chinese tourism has entered the wellness tourism phase. Figure 1.1 illustrates China's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita from 2014 to 2023. Concurrently, improved living standards have brought about several sub-health issues. For instance, population aging, chronic diseases, sub-health conditions, and the widespread impact of COVID-19 (Global Wellness Institute, 2020). Wellness tourism, aiming to maintain or enhance people's well-being and quality of life on a spiritual, physical, or psychological level, is gaining popularity in many countries, including China (Kiss & Török, 2001; Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001; Stará & Peterson, 2017).



**Figure 1.1**

*China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Per Capita from 2014-2023 (in U.S. dollars)*



Source: Data source: China GDP per capita. (2024). CEIC Statista. Retrieved June 3, 2024, from <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/china/gdp-per-capita>

Broadly speaking, wellness tourism is defined as tourism where the main motive for travel is to promote and maintain one's health. It aims to highlight holistic wellness, encompassing the well-being of the body, soul, and mind (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001; Andreu et al., 2021). Narrowly defined, wellness tourism is a submarket of health tourism, distinct from medical tourism and spa tourism (Bagga et al., 2020; Hall, 2011; Lunt et al., 2010; Zarei & Maleki, 2019). Wellness tourists can be categorized based on their travel motivations into primary wellness tourists and secondary wellness tourists (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). Primary wellness tourists travel solely for wellness purposes, while secondary wellness tourists do not



travel exclusively for wellness but engage with wellness activities during their trips, potentially becoming primary wellness tourists in the future. According to Sthapit et al. (2023) wellness tourism can also be categorized based on motivation, activities, and resource types into different kinds of wellness tourism (detailed in Chapter 2). In light of this, the present study focuses more on ecological wellness tourism, considering tourists who are both primary and secondary wellness tourists.

Wellness tourism, a relatively new subset of the global travel and tourism industry, first emerged in Europe in the mid-20th century. In China, the concept was formally introduced in 2012 when the city of Panzhuhua incorporated it into the China Sunshine Wellness Tourism City Development Plan (2012–2020) (Zou et al., 2021), marking a significant milestone in the country's wellness tourism development. Since then, the demand for wellness tourism in China has been steadily rising.



This growth can be attributed to three key factors. First, a solid economic foundation has provided the necessary financial and infrastructural support for the industry's expansion (Zhou et al., 2020). Second, the increasing affluence and evolving consumption patterns of Chinese consumers have led to a growing customer base (Wang et al., 2020). Finally, heightened public awareness of wellness tourism, driven by demographic shifts and changing health priorities, has further fueled demand (China's Demographic Shift, 2023).

Despite the rapid rise of wellness tourism in China—reflected in growing consumer interest, increased enterprise participation, and proactive government planning—the academic study of the sector remains insufficient. Both theoretical and





empirical research have struggled to keep pace with market needs, creating a gap that limits the industry's strategic development and evidence-based policymaking (Zhao & Wang, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). Addressing this disconnect between research and industry practice is essential for fostering the sustainable growth of wellness tourism in China.

The economic foundation for wellness tourism in China has been solidifying over time. Chinese consumers now have the financial capacity to afford wellness experiences (Zhou et al., 2020). This financial capability can be linked to China's rising per capita GDP, which exceeded USD8,000 in 2016 and is projected to reach USD 12621.72 by 2023, according to CEIC Statista (2024). This rising GDP suggests that not only do Chinese consumers have the means for wellness travel, but they are also increasingly likely to invest in such experiences (Wang et al., 2020).



Simultaneously, a more extensive consumer base for wellness tourism has been emerging. This group includes elderly individuals, patients with chronic diseases, people with sub-health conditions, those who experienced the impact of COVID-19, and individuals interested in health activities like hiking, fishing, camping, meditation, and so on (He, 2019; Wang et al., 2020). Demographic data support this trend: the report on Nutrition and Chronic Diseases of the Chinese Population (2020) highlighted the prevalence of various health conditions. Furthermore, China's aging population is set to increase, with projections showing that the proportion of the population aged 60 and over will rise from 18.7 percent in 2020 to 34.9 percent by 2050 (China's Demographic Shift, 2023). This points to a growing potential market for wellness tourism.





Moreover, awareness and understanding of wellness tourism have gradually increased in China. Global changes in attitudes, behaviors, and economic life have led to a growing interest in wellness tourism, which offers an opportunity to rejuvenate the body, mind, and soul (Andreu et al., 2021; Chae & Kim, 2022). The significance of health has been emphasized further by the Chinese government's Health China strategy, which was introduced in 2017.

It's crucial to consider the unique challenges faced by underdeveloped regions worldwide. These regions often struggle with unbalanced industrial development due to geographical constraints, economic foundations, and over-reliance on primary resources (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Li & Yu, 2014; Sharpley, 2018; Streimikiene et al., 2021). Following traditional agricultural or industrial development paths may not be the most beneficial approach for these areas. Instead, they should pursue sustainable development that leverages their unique advantages, such as diverse natural landscapes, rich ethnic customs, and untapped ecotourism resources (Holden, 2013; Moscardo, 2014; Sari & Sari, 2020). With the global focus on health and wellness, wellness tourism could be an ideal development strategy for these underdeveloped regions (Gan et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2022).

The underdeveloped western regions in China hold a wealth of tourism resources despite socio-economic disparities (Shi et al., 2020). These areas contain a significant share of the nation's scenic spots, nature reserves, and forest parks (Liu, 2012). These natural and cultural riches position these regions as wellness tourism hubs for potential growth. The growing trend of escaping urbanization and industrialization, coupled with increasing health consciousness and the desire for





unique travel experiences, further underscores this potential (Gan et al., 2023; Kessler et al., 2020; Tuzunkan, 2018). Wellness tourism could also stimulate economic growth and contribute to improving the quality of life for residents through job creation and community development, for instance (Aluculesei & Avram, 2021; Huang, 2014). Despite their economic underdevelopment, China's western regions are attractive destinations for wellness tourism due to their distinctive natural and cultural offerings (Jing et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the rise of wellness tourism in China, driven by a burgeoning economy, a growing consumer base, and increasing awareness, presents a unique opportunity for underdeveloped regions in the country. These regions' rich natural and cultural resources provide a strong foundation for developing wellness tourism.

However, understanding the motivations and behaviors of wellness tourists is vital to unlocking this potential. The existing gap in research in this area highlights the need for more in-depth and focused studies to comprehend the factors influencing tourists' intention to visit these underdeveloped areas.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

Undeveloped regions, characterized by complex terrain, remote locations, and weak infrastructure, exhibit stark contrasts with developed urban areas (Vaishar & Št'astná, 2023). Despite their abundant natural resources, including pristine forests, mineral deposits, and high-quality water sources, these areas often suffer from low resource utilization rates, single-industry economies, and short industrial chains due to





constraints in transportation, technology, and policy support (Danzi & Figini, 2023). A key challenge for these regions is effectively transforming their natural advantages into a sustainable economic engine.

Wellness tourism, as an industry that combines ecological value with economic benefits, offers a promising solution. By capitalizing on rich forest coverage, hot springs, clean air, and traditional wellness practices (e.g., Chinese medicine therapy), these regions can develop unique wellness tourism products to attract visitors seeking health improvement and stress relief (Kazakov & Oyner, 2021). According to the Global Wellness Institute (2024), the global wellness tourism market reached \$868 billion in 2023, accounting for 18.7% of total tourism expenditures, demonstrating a strong growth trajectory. This trend not only fuels the global expansion of wellness tourism but also presents an opportunity for underdeveloped regions to undergo economic transformation.

Moreover, as public awareness of health management grows and the demand for relaxation and natural therapy surges in the post-pandemic era, the pristine environment of underdeveloped regions makes them ideal wellness destinations. However, despite the vast market potential, most research has focused on the economic impact and development models of wellness tourism, with insufficient attention given to the critical challenge of attracting tourists (Li & Wen, 2024). Tourists' behavioral intentions play a crucial role in determining their actual travel decisions (Ajzen, 1991), making it essential to examine the key factors influencing wellness tourism intentions in underdeveloped regions. A deeper understanding of





these factors is crucial for enhancing destination appeal, optimizing resource allocation, and strengthening industry competitiveness.

Research on the behavioral intention of wellness tourists, particularly among Chinese consumers, is in its initial stages (Chen et al., 2023; Thal & Hudson, 2019). Such research primarily focuses on the definition and characteristics of behavioral intention in wellness tourism, with little attention given to the factors influencing this intention (Duan, 2021; Shen et al., 2022). Previous studies indicate that the fundamental aim of exploring these influencing factors is to understand how tourists form their behavioral intentions (He, 2019; Xie et al., 2019). Fully understanding these influences contributes to the creation of more effective wellness tourism products.



Previous studies (Huang, 2014; Kim et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2016) have primarily categorized research on the factors impacting tourists' behavioral intention into two main streams: one focused on internal factors such as motivation, attitude, perceived behavioral control, service quality expectations (Liu et al., 2021), attachment (Eom & Han, 2019), lifestyle (Wen & Huang, 2021), and the other on external factors including marketing mix (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013; Konu, 2010), destination resources (Wang et al., 2020), social influences (Zhong et al., 2021), and other environmental aspects (Chen, 2019; Csirmaz & Pető, 2015).

Although these factors play a crucial role in understanding the behavioral intentions of wellness tourists, existing studies mostly examine internal and external factors separately, lacking an in-depth exploration of the logical relationship between





them (Gan et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2022). In particular, there remains a significant research gap regarding why tourists choose to visit resource-rich but economically underdeveloped regions for wellness tourism (Li, 2022; Xie et al., 2019).

The China Knowledge Network (CNKI) database reflects a similar trend. Among the 1,026 wellness tourism-related papers published between 2009 and 2023, only a small number focus on the demand of wellness tourists, while research specifically addressing consumer behavior is even more scarce (see Section 2.6).

Currently, the mainstream theories used to improve the predictive accuracy of tourists' behavioral intentions mainly rely on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) or extend these frameworks by incorporating new variables. Although some studies attempt to integrate internal and external factors, discussions on how these factors interact and their specific impact on the behavioral intentions of wellness tourists remain limited (Hsiao & Tang, 2021). In reality, the behavioral intentions of wellness tourists are influenced not only by internal psychological factors but also by external environmental factors (Li, 2020), and both together shape tourists' decision-making and behavioral patterns (Hou, 2013).

In addition, research suggests a correlation exists between the internal and external factors influencing tourist behavior and between these categories of factors and tourist behavior intention. Field theory (Abbasi, Kumaravelu, Goh, & Dara Singh, 2021), among other behavioral theories, posits that human behavior is a function of both internal psychological factors and external environmental factors. Other theories, such as stimulus-response, stimulus-organism-response (Wu et al., 2022), and





cognitive theory (Klahr & Wallace, 2022), suggest that while external factors can directly impact behavior intention, internal factors can mediate the relationship between external factors and behavior intention.

The wellness tourism market represents a unique sub-market within the broader tourism industry, distinct from other sectors such as sightseeing tourism, leisure tourism, and vacation tourism. These differences are discernible regarding socio-economic backgrounds (Lu & Liu, 2009; Yu et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2020) and levels of consumer demand (He, 2019; Thal & Hudson, 2019). Specifically, this study focuses on the ecological wellness tourism market, which emphasizes the importance of the natural environment. By leveraging natural resources such as forests, healthy food, and recreational facilities, it provides a space for physical, mental, and spiritual relaxation (Xie et al., 2021). Therefore, when exploring consumer behavior intention in wellness tourism, we can expect unique internal and external influences that diverge from general tourism behavior.

Given the considerable differences between developed and underdeveloped regions (Yu et al., 2019), consumer preferences for wellness tourism in underdeveloped areas may differ from those in more developed regions. Therefore, analyzing the behavior intentions of wellness tourists is crucial for understanding consumer behavior within the developing wellness tourism market. This research can provide valuable insights for local managers and stakeholders, enabling them to craft more effective strategies for promoting the development of underdeveloped regions.





In conclusion, the investigation into the behavioral intention of wellness tourists in China, particularly in underdeveloped regions, has so far been inadequate, which has led to an imbalance between supply and demand in the wellness tourism market. As a unique sub-market of the broader tourism industry, wellness tourism presents distinct socio-economic backgrounds and levels of consumer demand, leading to unique internal and external influences on consumer behavior. However, comprehensive research has not examined the correlation and interplay between these internal and external factors and how they affect tourist behavior intention. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more nuanced and in-depth research into the behavioral intention of wellness tourists, which could provide critical insights for local managers and stakeholders in underdeveloped regions to promote the sustainable development of the wellness tourism market.



#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

Based on the purpose above, there are four specific objectives in the thesis:

i. To determine the effect of external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) on wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.

ii. To determine the effect of internal factors (motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control) on wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.





iii. To determine the effect of external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) on internal factors (motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control).

iv. To assess the mediating effect of internal factors (motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control) in the relationship between the external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.

## 1.5 Research Questions

i. Do the external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) affect wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China?

ii. Do the internal factors (motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control) affect wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China?

iii. Do the external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) affect the internal factors (motivation, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control)?





iv. Do the internal factors (motivation, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control) mediate the effect of external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) on wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China?

## 1.6 Research Hypotheses

A hypothesis is a formal statement that presents the expected relationship between an independent and dependent variable (Creswell, 1994). This study proposes 24 hypotheses based on four research questions. Hypotheses H1-H3 address research question 1, H4-H6 address research question 2, H7-H15 address research question 3, and H16-H24 address research question 4. Below is their corresponding relationship:



i. Do the external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) affect wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China?

**H<sub>1</sub>** *The marketing mix positively affects the wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>2</sub>** *The government influence positively affects the wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*





**H<sub>3</sub>** *The subjective norms positively affect the wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

ii. Do the internal factors (motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control) affect wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China?

**H<sub>4</sub>** *The motivation positively affects the wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>5</sub>** *The attitude positively affects the wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*



**H<sub>6</sub>** *The perceived behavioral control positively affects the wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

iii. Do the external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) affect the internal factors (motivation, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control)?

**H<sub>7</sub>** *The marketing mix positively affects motivation.*

**H<sub>8</sub>** *The marketing mix positively affects attitude.*





**H<sub>9</sub>** *The marketing mix positively affects perceived behavioral control.*

**H<sub>10</sub>** *The government influence positively affects motivation.*

**H<sub>11</sub>** *The government influence positively affects attitude.*

**H<sub>12</sub>** *The government influence positively affects perceived behavioral control.*

**H<sub>13</sub>** *The subjective norms positively affect motivation.*

**H<sub>14</sub>** *The subjective norms positively affect attitude.*

**H<sub>15</sub>** *The subjective norms positively affect perceived behavioral control.*



iv. Do the internal factors (motivation, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control) mediate the effect of external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) on wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China?

**H<sub>16</sub>** *Motivation is a mediating variable between marketing mix and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>17</sub>** *Attitude is a mediating variable between marketing mix and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*





**H<sub>18</sub>** *Perceived behavioral control is a mediating variable between marketing mix and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>19</sub>** *Motivation is a mediating variable between government influence and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>20</sub>** *Attitude is a mediating variable between government influence and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>21</sub>** *Perceived behavioral control is a mediating variable between government influence and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>22</sub>** *Motivation is a mediating variable between subjective norms and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>23</sub>** *Attitude is a mediating variable between subjective norms and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*

**H<sub>24</sub>** *Perceived behavioral control is a mediating variable between subjective norms and wellness tourists' behavioral intention to underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi, China.*





## 1.7 Theoretical Framework of Research

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) have long been employed to explain tourists' behavioral intentions by emphasizing the roles of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). However, scholars have raised concerns about the explanatory power of these models, arguing that they do not fully capture the complexity of behavioral intentions, particularly in tourism research (Hauslbauer et al., 2022; Leong et al., 2022). To address this gap, researchers have expanded TPB by incorporating additional variables, such as past experiences, destination image, and perceived risks, yet these extensions often lack a coherent theoretical structure, resulting in fragmented explanations of behavioral intention formation.

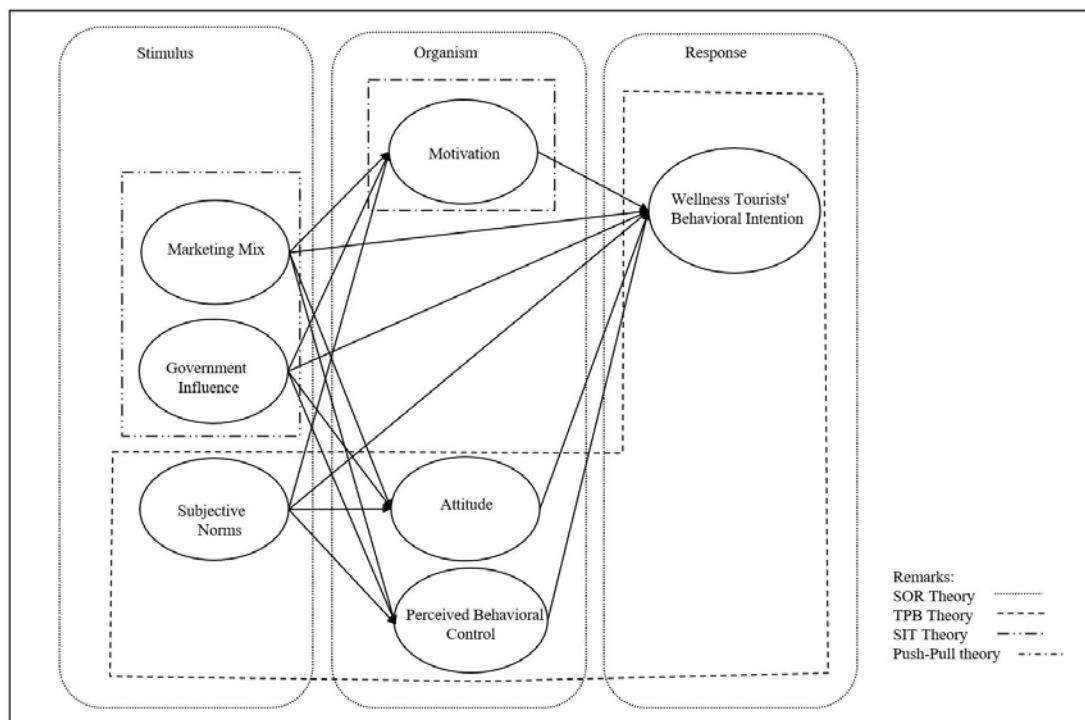
Additionally, the Stimulus-Response (S-R) model and its extension, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, highlight the role of external stimuli in shaping individual behavior, with internal psychological factors acting as mediators (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). However, due to its broad conceptual nature, S-O-R theory does not specify the precise external and internal factors affecting tourists' behavioral intentions, making it less applicable to the wellness tourism context. Meanwhile, Social Influence Theory (SIT) categorizes external influences into normative and informational social influences (Asch, 1956; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Turner, 1991; Venkatesan, 1966), but prior studies have not systematically examined how marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms—key external forces—shape wellness tourists' behavioral intentions in underdeveloped regions.



Given these theoretical gaps, this study integrates SIT with TPB and the Push-Pull Theory (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977) to construct a comprehensive model of wellness tourism behavior. The study considers the marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms as external factors (SIT), and motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control as internal factors (TPB and Push-Pull Theory). This framework (Figure 1.2) allows for an in-depth exploration of both direct and mediating effects, addressing the limitations of existing models in explaining wellness tourism behavior in underdeveloped regions. This study contributes to the literature by systematically examining how external and internal factors interact to shape tourists' behavioral intentions, offering a more holistic and theoretically grounded approach to understanding wellness tourism decision-making.

**Figure 1.2**

*Theoretical Framework*

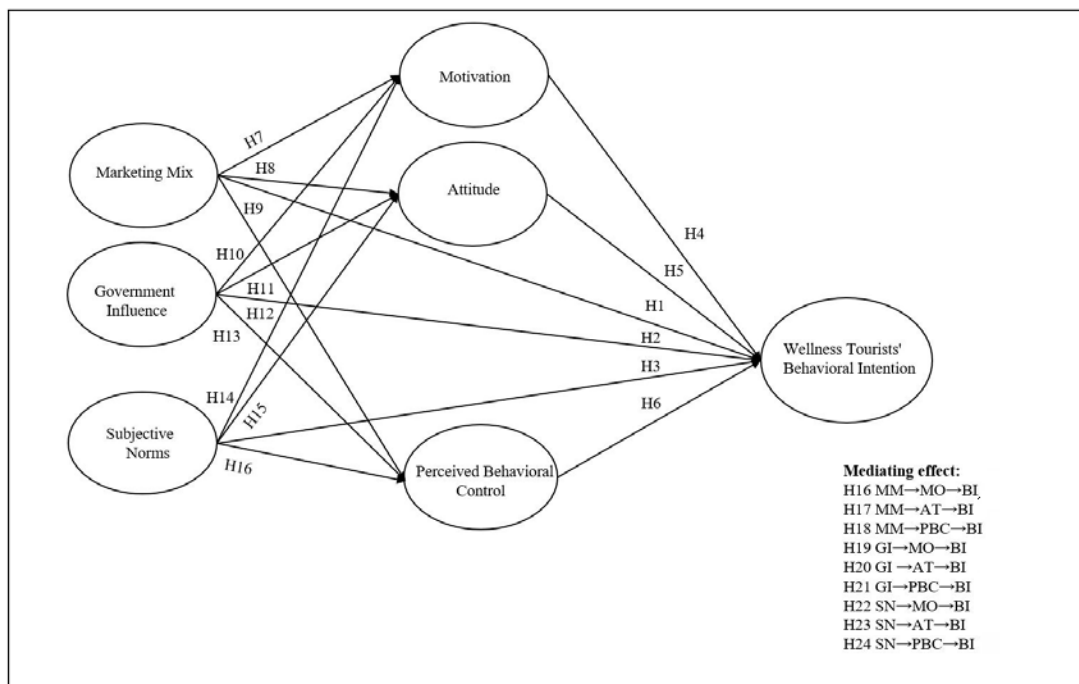




## 1.8 Conceptual Framework of Research

As depicted by the conceptual framework of this study, a total of seven variables are involved. On the left-hand side, there is a set of external factors encompassing three independent variables: marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms. In the middle, a group of internal factors acts as mediating variables, specifically encompassing motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control. On the right-hand side is a dependent variable: wellness tourists' behavioral intention. This study tests the influence of external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) on wellness tourists' behavioral intention, the impact of internal factors (motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control) on wellness tourists' behavioral intention, as well as the moderating effect of internal factors (motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control) in the relationship between external factors (marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms) and wellness tourists' behavioral intention. Figure 1.3 shows the conceptual framework of this study below.



**Figure 1.3***Conceptual Framework***1.9 Operational Definitions**

Operational definitions are a crucial concept in research and academic fields. They refer to the clear and specific definitions of concepts or variables for the purpose of a study, allowing them to be measured or manipulated. Operational definitions help researchers ensure that the concepts they discuss are accurately and consistently understood and applied within the study. Several important terms have been used in this research as follows:



### **1.9.1 Wellness Tourism**

This study defines wellness tourism specifically as forest ecological wellness tourism, which aims to promote public physical, mental, and spiritual health. This is achieved by using forest ecological resources, landscape resources, food and medicine resources, cultural resources, and the organic integration of health science to provide tourist health care, rehabilitation, and wellness services.

### **1.9.2 Wellness Tourist**

This study defines a wellness tourist as a resident over 18 years old in Shaanxi Province (excluding Hanzhong, Ankang, and Shangluo) and in Sichuan, Chongqing, and Hubei provinces. They include both primary-purpose forest ecological wellness tourists and secondary-purpose forest ecological wellness tourists.

### **1.9.3 Wellness Tourists' Behavioral Intention**

In this study, the author focuses only on the first visit intention. Therefore, in the context of wellness tourism, behavioral intention refers to potential tourists' willingness to visit ecological wellness destinations for various wellness-related activities.





#### **1.9.4 Internal Factors**

This study operationalizes the internal factors as internal micro-psychological factors, including tourists' motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control.

#### **1.9.5 Motivation**

This study focuses on the intrinsic aspects as the extrinsic elements are discussed in the context of the marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms (Liu et al., 2022). Moreover, people do not undertake wellness tourism to do something that people usually want to do, such as go to a new place and see the sights. Therefore, this study's motivation is operationalized as a wellness tourist's intrinsic drive to visit underdeveloped regions for wellness.

#### **1.9.6 Attitude**

In this study, attitude is defined as attitude towards behavior, i.e., the positive or negative feelings of wellness tourists towards the act of visiting underdeveloped areas for wellness.





### **1.9.7 Perceived Behavioral Control**

In this study, perceived behavioral control refers to the wellness tourist's perception of the ease or difficulty of visiting underdeveloped regions for wellness, as self-efficacy indicates.

### **1.9.8 External Factors**

This study operationalizes the external factors as macro-environmental factors, including the marketing mix, government influence, and subjective norms.



### **1.9.9 Marketing Mix**

In this study, the wellness tourism marketing mix is a series of strategies that companies adapt and implement regarding the product, price, place, and promotion of wellness tourism to meet the needs of wellness travelers.

### **1.9.10 Government Influence**

In this study, government influence can be defined as wellness tourists' perception that every planning, regulating, and investing by the government is to help them perform certain behaviors.





### 1.9.11 Subjective Norms

In this study, the subjective norms are the perceived opinion of others (e.g., relatives, close friends, colleagues/ or business associates) who are essential to the individual and influence your decision to travel to underdeveloped areas for wellness tourism.

### 1.9.12 Underdeveloped Regions

According to these criteria, this study focuses on underdeveloped regions, limited to three regions in southern Shaanxi Province, China, including Hanzhong, Ankang, and Shangluo.



### 1.10 Limitations of Research

This study examined wellness tourists' intention rather than their actual behavior when it comes to visiting underdeveloped regions in Southern Shaanxi of China. Since intention can change over time, it is also necessary to examine wellness tourists' actual behaviors. However, as the wellness tourism industry in China is still nascent, with a limited number of tourists currently participating in wellness tourism, it poses a challenge to study their actual behaviors. Therefore, once a substantial number of wellness tourists emerge in the country, future research could shift its focus to scrutinizing their actual behaviors to see if their intention are indeed converted into actions.





Next, this study focuses on Southern Shaanxi Province (Hanzhong, Ankang, and Shangluo), which, despite being rich in natural resources, remains economically underdeveloped. The findings of this research are specific to this region, and future studies could expand their scope to include a broader range of underdeveloped areas to enhance generalizability. The target population in this study consists of wellness tourists aged 18 and above from Shaanxi Province (excluding Hanzhong, Ankang, and Shangluo) and its surrounding regions (Sichuan, Chongqing, and Hubei provinces). This selection is based on cognitive theory and tourism frequency rankings, ensuring a statistically significant sample of potential wellness tourists. However, due to time and financial constraints, this study does not include wellness tourists from other parts of China or international tourists. Future research could address this limitation by examining wellness tourists from other provinces in China and international visitors to underdeveloped regions, providing a more comprehensive understanding of wellness tourism behavior.

Finally, this study focuses on the initial visit intention of wellness tourists. However, tourist behavioral intention also encompasses intention to revisit and recommend. The influencing factors of these intentions, such as service satisfaction and perceived value, may differ from those of initial visit intention. Therefore, future research should expand its scope to explore wellness tourists' revisit and recommendation intentions, incorporating a broader range of variables for a more comprehensive understanding of wellness tourist behavior.





## 1.11 Importance of Research

The importance of this research is multifaceted, encompassing both theoretical and practical significance. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering new insights and advancing understanding within the field. It helps to fill existing gaps in the literature and provides a framework for future research. Practically, the research has real-world implications and applications, offering valuable guidance to practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders.

### 1.11.1 Theoretical Significance



First, this study approaches the issue in the wellness tourism sector from the perspective of consumer demand, addressing the imbalance in supply-demand research currently in the literature. As wellness tourism is an emerging field, existing research primarily focuses on supply-side theoretical studies such as the concept of wellness tourism, wellness tourism resources, and the development of wellness tourism models. There is a lack of theoretical research on consumer behavior in wellness tourism. However, understanding customer needs is essential for formulating policies and strategies that meet tourist satisfaction. Therefore, this study directly addresses the behavioral intention of wellness tourists from a demand perspective to fill the gaps in current theory.





Second, this study adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model as a bridge, in conjunction with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Social Influence Theory, to construct a theoretical framework where internal factors act as mediating variables affecting external factors and wellness tourist behavioral intention. As classic theories for studying behavioral intention, TPB and SOR are widely used in consumer behavior research. However, most studies focus on enhancing the predictive ability of consumer behavior by expanding the variables in each model. Moreover, although some scholars have combined TPB with SOR to predict consumer behavior jointly, none have reclassified variables into external and internal factors based on the logic of SOR (external stimuli - internal organism - response), especially in the study of wellness tourist behavior. Lastly, the study incorporates social influence theory, further dividing external factors into market marketing, government influence, and subjective norms according to social influence theory, which expands the adaptability of Social Influence Theory.

Third, the uniqueness of wellness tourism in underdeveloped areas is reflected in the design of variable scales. For example, in the design of market marketing variables, although market marketing is used in most consumer behavior research, wellness tourism in underdeveloped areas has distinct characteristics compared to other conventional tourism. Therefore, in designing the items of market marketing variables, this study reflects the marketing characteristics of underdeveloped areas. Furthermore, previous studies have found that government influence plays a significant role in tourism in underdeveloped regions. However, few scholars have included government influence in the study of behavioral intention, let alone in the study of wellness tourist behavioral intention. Additionally, based on the TPB, this





study adopts attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as classic variables. Since wellness tourism is still in its early stages, factors related to attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control and motivation still need to be extensively discussed, and these variables also have unique characteristics in this study.

### 1.11.2 Practical Significance

First, it helps to improve the competitiveness of the wellness tourism enterprise. Examining the direct impact of the marketing mix (constructs including product, price, channel, and promotion) of external factors on the behavior intention of wellness tourists and examining the indirect impact of marketing mix on behavior intention through internal factors to identify the important, relevant constructs in the marketing mix that affect the behavior intention of wellness tourist in underdeveloped regions. To provide a more rational marketing strategy for the stakeholders involved in wellness tourism.

Next, this research contributes to formulating more scientifically feasible policies for policymakers aiming to promote the economic transformation and upgrading of underdeveloped regions. The study examines the direct influence of government influence (including planning, regulating, and investing) as an external factor in the behavioral intention of wellness tourists. It also examines the indirect impact of government influence on behavior intention through internal factors.





Ultimately, this research aims to identify the government's significant role in influencing wellness tourists' behavioral intention in underdeveloped regions.

Lastly, it supports the sustainable economic growth of underdeveloped regions. Even though some underdeveloped areas have a wealth of natural resources, their economic development is lagging. The study of the behavioral intention of wellness tourists can promote the development of the local tourism industry and improve the living conditions of residents.

## 1.12 Summary

In summary, this study focuses on understanding the factors influencing wellness tourists' behavioral intention toward visiting underdeveloped areas for wellness tourism in China. This chapter provides a clear blueprint for the subsequent sections of the study. Specifically, these sections include background research, problem statement, the purpose of the study, objectives of the study, research questions, research hypotheses, conceptual framework of the research, operational definitions, limitations of the study, and importance of research. The next chapter is dedicated to reviewing literature related to wellness tourist behavioral intention and identifying gaps not addressed in the literature.

