

Co-Creation in Wellness Tourism: Insights from Thailand

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Abstract: With the rapid growth of wellness tourism and rising consumer demand for personalized and interactive experiences, achieving sustainable success in the industry requires a deep understanding of the emotional and psychological aspects of customer experiences. As modern travelers increasingly seek active involvement in shaping their health and wellness journeys, co-creation has become a vital component of service delivery. This study examines the role of co-creation in shaping customer experiences within Thailand's wellness tourism sector. Using a qualitative approach, 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from leading spa hotels to explore the interactive processes that drive customer participation in co-creating wellness services. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies patterns and relationships within customer-provider interactions across three interconnected stages—before, during, and after service delivery. The findings reveal that the intensity and nature of these interactions evolve throughout the wellness journey, leading to distinct forms of co-creation and varying customer outcomes. Understanding these dynamic interactions provides industry stakeholders with valuable insights into innovative business practices that enhance customer satisfaction and strengthen a destination's competitive advantage. By bridging theory and practice, this study contributes to wellness tourism literature and offers sustainable business strategies for integrating co-creation into service models, ultimately fostering customer loyalty and long-term business sustainability.

Keywords: Wellness tourism, Value co-creation, Customer engagement, Customer-provider interaction

1. Introduction

Wellness tourism has experienced significant growth over the past decades (Choi et al 2015; Dillette, Douglas & Andrzejewski 2021). The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) projects that the global wellness economy will expand at an annual rate of 7.3% from 2023 to 2028, with the sector rebounding from the pandemic and expected to reach approximately \$9.0 trillion by 2028 (GWI 2023; Jackson, Sam & Dawson 2024). Wellness tourism, which focuses on travel aimed at improving health and well-being, increasingly emphasizes the emotional and psychological dimensions of customer experiences. Personalized services are especially vital in fostering customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Vargo & Lusch 2008). The customer engagement and value co-creation is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in enhancing tourism experiences (Nangpiire, Silva & Alves 2022), with personalized interactions playing a pivotal role in driving customer satisfaction and long-term loyalty (Kim, Chiang & Tang 2017; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). However, research on customer engagement and its contribution to experience creation within service and hospitality contexts remains limited (Kim, Chiang & Tang 2017; He, Liu & Li 2021; Meeprom & Chancharat 2022).

Thailand has emerged as a key player in the global wellness economy, with its wellness sector valued at US\$40.5 billion in 2023, compared to US\$12 billion in 2017, (GWI 2018). However, despite its growing popularity, wellness tourism remains an ambiguous and somewhat inconsistent concept due to diverse literature and varying terminology used across different countries to describe businesses within the sector (Dini & Pencarelli 2021). This study examines the interactive processes of co-creation, focusing on how customer engagement contributes to service customization and competitive differentiation within Thailand's wellness tourism sector from the perspective of wellness tourism providers. To address these objectives, the study explores the following research questions:

- How do customers contribute to value co-creation in wellness tourism?
- What are the primary forms of customer-provider collaboration that shape service experiences?
- What strategies can wellness tourism businesses implement to strengthen co-creation processes?

This study is particularly significant given the rapid expansion of wellness tourism and shifting consumer expectations toward more personalized and interactive service experiences (Choi et al 2020). Furthermore, previous studies highlight the strategic benefits of co-creation, including enhanced customer loyalty, brand differentiation, and service innovation (Yi & Gong 2013; McManus & Ardley 2019). However, research on co-creation specific to wellness tourism remains limited (Pongwat, Sun & Law 2024), underscoring the need for this study. By providing empirical insights into how businesses can integrate co-creation into their service models, this research offers strategic guidance for sustainable tourism development. By bridging theory and practice, the study contributes to wellness tourism literature and proposes sustainable business strategies that enhance

customer engagement, foster brand loyalty, and support long-term business success. The article is structured as follows: the first part provides a literature review on wellness tourism, customer engagement and value co-creation, followed by the qualitative research methodology, key findings, discussion and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Wellness Tourism

The United Nations World Tourism Organization refers to wellness tourism as travel aimed at improving and balancing all of the main domains of human life including physical, mental, emotional, occupational, intellectual and spiritual. The Global Wellness Institute defines wellness as the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health (GWI 2018). However, wellness is often confused with related concepts such as health, well-being, and happiness, leading to ambiguity in its definition (Chaulagain, Pizam & Wang 2021; Xie, Guan & He 2022). Wellness is a multidimensional concept, encompassing environmental, social, spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional dimensions (Dini & Pencarelli 2021; GWI 2023). GWI (2023) categorizes the wellness economy into eleven sectors: (1) Personal Care & Beauty, (2) Healthy Eating, Nutrition, & Weight Loss, (3) Physical Activity, (4) Wellness Tourism, (5) Public Health, Prevention, & Personalized Medicine, (6) Traditional & Complementary Medicine, (7) Wellness Real Estate, (8) Mental Wellness, (9) Spas, (10) Workplace Wellness, and (11) Thermal/Mineral Springs.

Thailand is a key player in the global health and wellness industry, with its wellness sector valued at \$40.5 billion in 2023, compared to \$12 billion in 2017 (GWI 2018; GWI 2024). The country has long been recognized for its wellness tourism offerings, particularly traditional Thai massage, which is deeply rooted in Buddhist traditions and influenced by Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian healing practices. Over time, Thailand's spa and wellness industry has expanded to include diverse services such as herbal treatments, hot stone therapies, and aromatherapy, blending traditional healing methods with modern wellness concepts. Thailand's leadership in the wellness tourism market is reflected in its revenue and visitor numbers. In 2024, the country's top three wellness sectors were wellness tourism (US\$12.34 billion), healthy eating, nutrition, and weight loss (US\$9.18 billion), and personal care and beauty (US\$7.19 billion) (GWI 2024). With its strong cultural heritage, government support, and increasing global demand for holistic well-being experiences, Thailand continues to be a leading destination for wellness tourism.

2.2 Customer Engagement

Customer engagement refers to the depth of customers' participation and their emotional and behavioral connection to a brand, product, or service. It extends beyond the act of purchase, encompassing two-way interactions that strengthen customer-enterprise relationships (Xie, Guan & He 2022). Active engagement is fundamental to successful value co-creation, as it fosters collaboration between customers and service providers (Vargo & Lusch 2016). Customer engagement plays a vital role in making co-creation an integral part of the tourism experience (Nangpiire, Silva & Alves 2022; Vargo & Lusch 2008). Romero (2017) views value co-creation as a behavioral manifestation of customer engagement, enabling customers to actively participate in interactive, value co-creative experiences within the travel context. Customer engagement is a critical focus in the hospitality and tourism industry, as businesses implement strategies to enhance customer connections at different stages of the consumption journey (So & Li 2020). Seyfi et al (2024) examine how different dimensions of tourist engagement influence heritage tourists' intentions to revisit and share word-of-mouth (WOM). They emphasize that tourist engagement plays a crucial role in building sustainable relationships with destinations, enhancing long-term business performance, and contributing to the development of the tourism sector.

2.3 Value Co-Creation in Service Industries

Co-creation and value co-creation are closely related but distinct concepts. Both play a fundamental role in modern business and innovation strategies, yet their scope and focus differ. Co-creation broadly refers to collaborative processes in which multiple stakeholders—such as customers, businesses, or communities—work together to create new ideas, products, or services. In contrast, value co-creation builds on the idea that value exchange is not only defined in terms of the supplier, but is also generated by interaction among providers, users and other co-creators (Payne et al 2008; Bettencourt 1997). Customer value co-creation is defined as “benefit realized from integration of resources through activities and interactions with collaborators in the customer's service network” (McColl-Kennedy et al 2012). Yi and Gong (2013) identify two primary dimensions of customer value co-creation behavior: 1) Customer Participation Behavior – Includes activities such as information seeking, information sharing, responsible behavior, and personal interaction; and 2) Customer Citizenship Behavior – Involves behaviors such as providing feedback, advocating for services, assisting other customers, and

demonstrating tolerance. These behaviors significantly shape service experiences and influence customer satisfaction in wellness tourism. Gallan et al (2013) highlight the importance of customer participation in improving health service outcomes. McColl-Kennedy et al (2012) point out the diverse nature of value co-creation activities in health services and further categorize them into eight key activities: 1) cooperating, 2) collating information, 3) combining complementary therapies, 4) co-learning, 5) adapting behaviors, 6) connecting with others, 7) co-production, and 8) cognitive engagement.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand how customers and service providers work together to create value in wellness tourism experiences. Qualitative research is useful for exploring complex topics in health and well-being, as it provides deeper insights into real-life experiences that numbers alone cannot fully explain (Braun & Clarke 2014). The qualitative approach is essential for this study, as it focuses on real-world interactions and uncovers important details that other research methods might overlook (Marshall & Rossman 2014). This study involved 30 in-depth interviews with wellness tourism providers across six major wellness tourism hubs in Thailand—Bangkok, Pattaya, Hua Hin, Chiang Mai, Phuket and Samui. Participants included spa managers and service providers from 15 well-known spas, divided into four types: 2 destination spas, 2 medical spas, 7 hotel spas, and 4 day spas (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1: Participant list

Destination	Type of Provider	No. of Interviewees (n=30)
Bangkok	Medical Spa 1	2
	Medical Spa 2	1
	Day Spa 1	2
Pattaya	Hotel Spa	2
	Day Spa	3
Hua Hin	Hotel Spa	3
	Destination Spa	2
Chiang Mai	Hotel Spa	3
	Destination Spa	2
Phuket	Hotel Spa 1	2
	Hotel Spa 2	1
	Day Spa	2
Samui	Hotel Spa 1	2
	Hotel Spa 2	2
	Day Spa	1

4. Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of the interview results, this study identified eight activities of value co-creation for wellness spa, adapted from McColl-Kennedy (2012) as discussed below:

Activity 1. Co-operating

Definition of Practice: Cooperating involves mutual efforts between customers and service providers to achieve shared goals, such as tailoring treatments to meet specific health needs.

Theme Connection: Co-cooperating captures this customer-provider partnership, emphasizing a collaborative spirit where both parties work actively and equally toward the desired outcomes.

Finding: In wellness tourism, customers and providers often cooperate during treatments or planning services. For example, a customer’s willingness to provide health history allows providers to optimize therapeutic solutions, underscoring the cooperative nature of value co-creation.

Activity 2. Co-sharing

Definition of Practice: Collating information involves gathering and exchanging relevant data, such as preferences or feedback, to enhance service delivery.

Theme Connection: Co-sharing reflects the mutual exchange of information between customers and service providers.

Finding: In the wellness context, customers share their health concerns or desired outcomes, while providers reciprocate with details on treatment options. This bilateral sharing ensures alignment and contributes to service customization and value enhancement.

Activity 3. Co-designing

Definition of Practice: This involves integrating different therapeutic approaches to create personalized wellness plans.

Theme Connection: Co-designing extends this idea by involving customers in crafting services that incorporate their preferences and needs.

Finding: Co-designing is evident in wellness tourism when customers participate in selecting or combining therapies, such as a mix of traditional Thai massage and modern aromatherapy, fostering a sense of ownership and satisfaction.

Activity 4. Co-learning

Definition of Practice: Colearning emphasizes shared knowledge development during interactions, where both customers and providers gain insights.

Theme Connection: Co-learning maintains the focus on knowledge exchange, highlighting the dynamic nature of value creation.

Finding: For example, a customer may learn about Thai herbal compresses, while providers understand customer preferences through feedback. This reciprocal knowledge enrichment strengthens the service relationship.

Activity 5. Co-adapting

Definition of Practice: This practice reflects flexibility and adaptation based on customer needs and feedback.

Theme Connection: Co-adapting underscores the iterative nature of modifying practices or services to align with customer expectations.

Finding: Providers might adapt treatment protocols based on customer input, such as altering session durations or focusing on specific health concerns, showcasing their commitment to personalized care.

Activity 6. Co-communicating

Definition of Practice: Connecting emphasizes building relationships and fostering emotional bonds between customers and providers.

Theme Connection: Co-communicating builds on this by highlighting open dialogue and ongoing interaction.

Discussion: Effective communication is critical during all stages of the customer journey in wellness tourism, from initial inquiries to post-service follow-ups. Emotional connections can enhance customer loyalty and satisfaction.

Activity 7. Co-participating

Definition of Practice: Coproduction involves customers actively engaging in the creation and delivery of services.

Theme Connection: Co-participating emphasizes the customer's proactive role in shaping the service experience.

Finding: For instance, in wellness spas, customers actively participate by choosing their treatments, adjusting settings, or providing real-time feedback during sessions, making them partners in value creation.

Activity 8. Co-branding

Definition of Practice: Cerebral activities refer to mental and emotional efforts customers invest in shaping the value they derive.

Theme Connection: Co-branding connects the co-creation of a shared identity or reputation through collaborative experiences.

Finding: Customers who feel invested in the service may advocate for the brand, becoming ambassadors and enhancing its reputation. For example, sharing positive experiences on social media or recommending services aligns customer satisfaction with brand-building.

In line with prior research (Bueno et al 2019; Ferguson, Paulin & Bergeron 2010), this study conceptualizes the customer experience into three stages: **before service** (pre-purchase), **during service** (purchase), and **after service** (post-purchase). The analysis emphasizes the levels of interaction and the types of co-creation activities at each stage as in Figure 1.

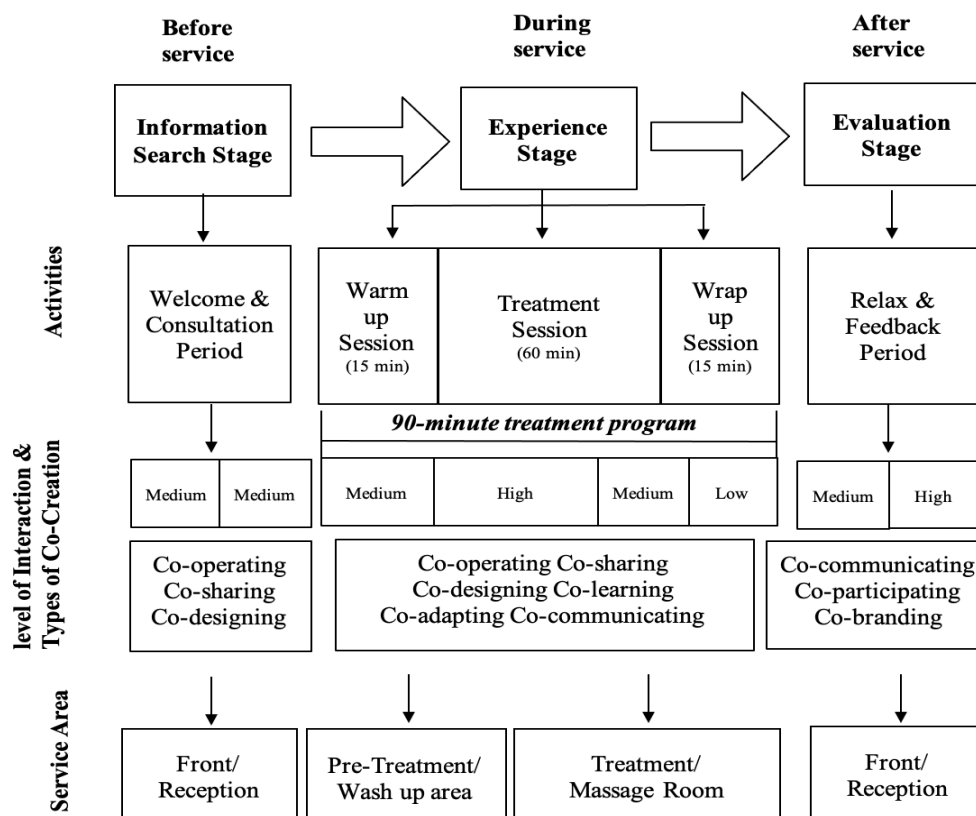


Figure 1: An illustration of before-during-after service of customer wellness journey

Before Service: Information Search Stage

The information search marks the initial point of contact between the customer and the service provider. This interaction typically occurs at the spa’s front office, either in person or remotely (via phone or email), as customers gather information on service offerings and make purchasing decisions. Customers seek clarity on services to fulfill cognitive needs, as outlined by Yi and Gong (2013).

Interactions during this stage range from low to medium intensity and involve co-creation processes such as **co-learning**, **collating**, and **combining complementary services**.

A hotel spa manager described this stage:

"When customers share their health concerns and preferences, we listen attentively and tailor our suggestions to their needs. By understanding their expectations, we can adapt existing services or combine treatments to provide optimal solutions."

During Service: Experience Stage

The experience stage encompasses all customer interactions with the spa and its environment during their visit, including warm-up, treatment, and wrap-up sessions. Interaction levels fluctuate, beginning at medium during warm-up, decreasing during deep relaxation phases of treatment, and returning to medium during the wrap-up. Managing these interactions effectively enables co-creation opportunities to occur. These include **co-learning, collating, cooperating, and co-production** (Jaakkola & Alexander 2014).

As noted by a medical spa manager: "Providing a customized spa experience requires listening carefully to customers and involving them in the design of treatments. Building trust from the start is key, and sincerity fosters long-term relationships. Service is personal—there's no one-size-fits-all approach."

A destination spa manager added: "Customers often come with specific needs and expect individualized services. By treating them as partners and respecting their input, we co-create treatments that suit their preferences, fostering loyalty and enhancing expertise across diverse customer groups."

After Service: Evaluation Stage

Following the treatment, customers engage in post-purchase behaviors such as usage, feedback provision, and connection with others. Interaction levels at this stage are medium to high, with co-creation activities including **co-learning, collating**, and opportunities for customers to connect with friends, family, or other professionals.

A day spa manager highlighted: "We actively gather feedback from customers, learning their likes and dislikes. By continuously assessing their input, we refine our offerings and design services that cater to diverse preferences."

A hotel spa manager emphasized the role of referrals: "Satisfied customers often recommend our services to their loved ones, collaborating with us to ensure the recommended experiences meet expectations. This cycle of satisfaction and feedback has helped us retain loyal customers for years."

The findings reveal that customer engagement behaviors significantly shape the co-creation process in wellness tourism. Pre-service interactions, such as information seeking and booking, set the tone for customer expectations. During the service, personal interactions and feedback contribute to the customization and enhancement of wellness experiences. Post-service engagement, including advocacy and repeat visits, demonstrates the impact of co-creation on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Furthermore, Thailand's cultural identity plays a pivotal role in attracting wellness tourists and enhancing the authenticity of the co-creation experience. Stakeholders in wellness tourism can leverage these insights to design culturally immersive and customer-centric services that align with global wellness trends.

The findings underscore the importance of managing customer interactions across all stages to facilitate meaningful co-creation, strengthen relationships, and ensure long-term business success.

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of value co-creation in wellness tourism and offers practical insights for industry stakeholders in Thailand and beyond.

5. Discussion

As customers pursue personalized health benefits, they engage in diverse co-creation activities with service providers, characterized by varying levels of interaction at different stages of the service journey. These interactions not only foster value co-creation but also drive service innovation by integrating the unique cultural and natural resources of the destination with health tourism offerings. The findings emphasize the critical role of communication in successful customer co-creation, aligning with prior research that highlights intensive customer-service provider interactions as key to new service or product success (McManus & Ardley 2019). Value co-creation involves the service provider offering superior value propositions, with customers determining value through consumption (Payne et al 2008). In service industries, customer interaction is a recognized factor for innovation performance (Carbonell et al 2009; Hu et al 2009). Mathis et al (2016) state that travelers who engage in co-creation report more positive vacation experiences and demonstrate greater loyalty to service providers. Effectively managing these interactions maximizes customer lifetime value and fosters collaborative innovation, which results in benefits such as cost savings, improved service alignment with customer needs, and stronger customer relationships (Hoyer et al 2010). These interactions emphasize that value co-creation in health and wellness services is a multidimensional process involving active customer engagement. Each practice aligns with a theme to create a cohesive framework:

- Co-operating focuses on mutual collaboration for shared success.
- Co-sharing highlights the importance of transparent communication.
- Co-designing empowers customers to shape their service experiences.
- Co-learning fosters mutual knowledge development.
- Co-adapting ensures flexibility to meet evolving customer needs.
- Co-communicating builds trust and long-term relationships.
- Co-participating emphasizes customer agency in service delivery.
- Co-branding transforms customers into advocates, reinforcing brand equity.

By weaving these practices and themes into operational strategies, providers can ensure holistic and sustainable value co-creation, particularly in wellness tourism where personalization, cultural authenticity, and customer-provider synergy are paramount.

6. Conclusions

This study offers key strategies for wellness service providers to enhance co-creation and customer engagement. First, providers should actively involve customers in the co-creation process to enhance personalization. Second, they should evaluate the service journey from both customer and supplier perspectives, identifying key activities, levels of interaction, and co-creation opportunities at each stage. Finally, pinpointing critical touchpoints that facilitate co-creation throughout the service journey can help create a seamless and engaging experience. By implementing these strategies, wellness tourism stakeholders can foster a more sustainable and competitive industry that aligns with customer expectations. Co-creation fosters a sense of ownership and emotional connection, which are essential for enhancing customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. Integrating co-creation strategies can help wellness tourism providers strengthen customer relationships, differentiate their services, and ensure long-term business sustainability in an increasingly competitive market.

Positive interactions between customers and service providers contribute to greater satisfaction, well-being, and long-term engagement, underscoring the importance of co-creation in delivering high-quality wellness experiences. As the industry evolves, consumer preferences are shifting toward more personalized and interactive service offerings. This research provides practical insights into how businesses can integrate co-creation into their service models, supporting sustainable tourism development. By analyzing customer engagement within Thailand's wellness tourism sector, this study highlights how interactions between customers and service providers unfold before, during, and after the experience. Ultimately, it emphasizes co-creation as a dynamic and collaborative process that enhances customer satisfaction and drives long-term business success.

To remain competitive, wellness destinations must prioritize designing transformative and emotionally engaging experiences. Rather than offering standardized services, providers should adopt an experience-driven, personalized approach that fosters customer well-being and deepens emotional connections. The findings of this study can help wellness tourism businesses refine their strategies, develop interactive platforms, and create opportunities for customers to be actively involved—both physically and emotionally—throughout their wellness journey.

Ethics Declaration: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with relevant ethical standards.

AI Declaration: No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conceptualization, research, writing, or editing of this paper. All content was developed solely by the authors.

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