

## A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING WELLNESS TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE WELLNESS TOURISM CLUSTERS IN THAILAND

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**Abstract:** This article aims to identify the variables that determine wellness tourism destination competitiveness using a case study in Thailand. This study outlines a suggested competitiveness framework for wellness tourism destinations based on the viewpoint of wellness tourism clusters. The study's model illustrates the different categories and components and their relationship to competitiveness. Thirteen in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with leading experts in wellness tourism. Thematic and content analysis was used to examine the interview data using the Nvivo 12 programme. The study identified seven emerging themes that encompass factors that affect a wellness tourism destination's competitiveness. These factors include the destination's environment, the area's policy and strategy to facilitate travelling and wellness tourism, infrastructure and capability to support wellness tourism, human-made resources and culture of wellness tourism, strategy and structure for healthcare services, potential for developing innovation and cooperation to build collaborative strengths and proactive marketing. The participants' descriptions show the existence of a comprehensive framework for assessing the competitiveness of wellness tourism destinations in the Thai wellness tourism market. The concept elucidates the dynamic complexity of wellness tourism destination competition, which is believed to guarantee success for both individual stakeholders and society.

**Key words:** wellness tourism, wellness destination, destination competitiveness, assessment framework, qualitative study, sustainable development goals

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### INTRODUCTION

Tourism and travel industries are important potential drives for development and economic growth, creating employment opportunities as high as 6.1% of overall employment in 2021. The rate was 5.3% higher than in 2020 but 10.3% lower than in 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022). Tourism and travel industries are the main sources of income for different countries, are in the highest growth rate industrial group and promote the development and growth of other industries that are directly and indirectly related. For Thailand, these industries are considered key in the first S-Curve industries and significantly stimulate economic growth. Data from the Digital Government Development Agency (2023) indicated that the number of international tourists visiting Thailand between 2015 and 2019 trended continuously upward, from 29.9 million people in 2015 to 39.9 million in 2019. The number in 2020 fell to 6.7 million people due to unforeseen circumstances, economic conditions and the COVID-19 pandemic; however, in the first quarter of 2023, Thailand's tourism situation improved, with 5.5 million international tourists travelling to Thailand, bringing an average of two hundred thousand Thai baht into the country (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023).

Results from the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing popularity of wellness trends have given rise to a new travelling style, i.e. wellness tourism. The trend has gained popularity both in Thailand and abroad and is likely to grow continuously. Wellness tourism refers to travel associated with finding, maintaining and promoting good health, covering all services relating to holistic treatment and health improvement. Service users can choose a health-promoting service while travelling abroad (The Global Wellness Institute, 2017) and in Thailand, wellness tourism can be divided into two major types. The first is health treatment and therapy tourism, where treatment and therapy are combined with tourism, e.g. travelling and receiving dental services, aesthetic surgery and gender affirmation surgery in a hospital or clinic. The second is health-promoting tourism refers to travelling to tourist attractions, staying in hotels, resorts or wellness centres and attending health-promoting activities, such as Thai massage, aromatherapy, mineral bath and herbal therapy (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019).

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Wellness tourism is also related to and promotes other forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism, culinary tourism, eco-sustainable tourism, sports tourism, adventure tourism, 'agri-tourism', medical tourism, spiritual tourism and 'volun-tourism'. This connection might stem from the fact that wellness tourists who travel domestically or internationally might have secondary objectives related to other types of tourism. The data from the global tourism industry showed that the value of global wellness tourism is close to culinary tourism and eco-sustainable tourism (Global Wellness Institute, 2013). The global wellness economy report 2022 by Global Wellness Institute (2022) also showed that the global wellness economy value was worth 4.4 trillion US dollars (USD) and was forecasted to reach 7 trillion USD by 2025. Personal care and beauty groups generated the highest income at 955 billion USD, followed by healthy eating, nutrition and weight loss at 946 billion USD, physical activity at 738 USD billion and wellness tourism at 436 billion USD respectively.

In the global wellness economy context, wellness tourism currently generates a large amount of income for the country because such tourists are highly educated, well-off, stay for long periods and have higher travel budgets than others. This is consistent with the TTB Analytics Centre analysis report, which predicted that 2023 Thai wellness tourism could generate almost 728 million USD. The data also indicated that Thailand is an important destination for wellness tourism regarding its good healthcare and health security. From the 2021 Global Health Security Index report, Thailand ranked fifth of 195 countries worldwide and first in Asia (The Global Health Security Index, 2022). The market value of wellness tourism in Thailand is also predicted to increase due to being a tourist destination with outstanding, beautiful, abundant and diversified natural resources. The country is also abundant in natural and human-made tourist destinations, including traditions, cultures and heritage unique to each area. Furthermore, natural resources are used for treatments and physical and mental health rejuvenation. Staff are knowledgeable and skilled in providing services, especially Thai massage and natural herbal spa treatments and Thailand offers a wide selection of certified hotels and accommodations.

Moreover, transportation infrastructure is convenient and covers all areas. Thai identity, which is kind and attentive, is also attractive to tourists. As a result, wellness tourism in Thailand has gained more popularity and leads the Asia region as a global wellness tourism destination. The top 20 global wellness tourism destination survey determines the criteria of the number of trips, direct employment and expenditures, indicating that Thailand received 12.5 million trips, representing an estimated direct employment value of 0.53 million and expenditures of 12.0 billion USD; these figures are 13th in the world. Furthermore, from the top 10 ranking of Asia-Pacific wellness tourism countries, Thailand ranked fourth for income at 12,018.4 million USD, following China, Japan and India (Global Wellness Institute, 2018).

The data above indicate that wellness tourism was a business sector that generated significant revenue for Thailand. It was specified as one of the fifth first S-Curve industries in the targeted industry research in the National Research Plan and Strategy No. 9 (2017–2021) (National Research Council of Thailand, 2016). The Department of Health Service Support, Ministry of Public Health (2016) specified that the strategic plan for wellness tourism in Thailand includes increasing the competitiveness of healthcare services, promoting healthcare services categorised by its main products, emphasising developing healthcare workers for academic excellence at all levels, developing community or small enterprises to support wellness tourism and promoting marketing and publicity (Department of Health Service Support, Ministry of Public Health, 2016). Furthermore, the promotion of wellness tourism is also a goal of Thailand's National Development Strategy (2017–2026).

Competitiveness is a comparative factor to measure an individual's ability or capability against competitors. Developing competitiveness to attain superiority is a goal that every country or organisation aims to realise. The competitiveness of wellness tourism in this study refers to the readiness of an area to facilitate the development, improvement or changes and the appeal of that area to attract wellness tourists to travel to that area compared to the competitors. The Thailand 10-year Tourism Development Direction Project Report by Economics Tourism and Sports Division, Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2016) showed that Thailand's wellness tourism competitiveness was at a moderate level; however, it maintained a high interest in the global market. Thailand has long been famous for wellness tourism; however, its popularity declined due to a loss of identity caused by the deterioration of different tourist attractions and management problems with maintaining identity or highlighting the area. Therefore, to increase the potentiality of wellness tourism, emphasis should be placed on creating uniqueness, improving and developing tourist attraction standards, connecting to the local lifestyle, creating new experiences and utilising natural, cultural and local knowledge resources (Economics Tourism and Sports Division, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2016).

Research from other countries has been conducted in the past decade, focusing on developing guidelines to improve the potential of tourist attractions related to wellness tourism and provide a competitive edge over other countries in the future. Some studies compiled the determinants and strategies of developing medical tourism through a service integration and tourism destination competitiveness approach (Hosseini and Taghvaei, 2021). Other studies explore factors that affect destination competitiveness and its relationships with tourism satisfaction and tourists' behavioural intentions to return and to recommend the location to others (Zeng et al., 2021). Further research aims to conceptualise a construct called 'medical tourism experience' and develop a scale for measurement (Ghosh and Mandal, 2019) or construct a health tourism destination index to contribute to the overall strategic planning process by identifying improvements in activities and enhancing competitiveness in health tourism management (Lee and Li, 2019). Additionally, some extant literature aims to identify the determinants of health tourism competitiveness using customised indicators and Dwyer's integrated model (Mosammam et al., 2019), explores the importance and performance of medical tourism destination competitiveness (Junio et al., 2017), identifies the attractiveness of wellness destinations (Medina-Muñoz and Medina-Muñoz, 2014) and or investigates the potentials of Serbia as a medical tourism destination in the international tourism market (Milićević et al., 2013).

Focusing on related literature in Thailand's information databases, i.e. ThaiJo, Thai Journal Citation Index-TCI and Thai-Lis Digital Collection using keywords 'wellness tourism', 'destination' and 'competitiveness', revealed studies that propose

guidelines for developing wellness tourism destination competitiveness using case studies from different areas. An example was a study determining the potential of Betong district in Yala province as a wellness destination in the deep south of Thailand, serving both domestic and international tourists (Praprom and Laipaporn, 2023). Other studies analysed the strategy of Thai medical services promotion at foreign markets and the development of medical tourism (Ushakov et al., 2019), the potential spatial analysis of the west coast zone (Thailand Riviera) and the development of the area to be a wellness tourism destination (Suksri and Samkhuntod, 2021). Additional research examined actors supporting the readiness of wellness tourism and the presentation of wellness tourism activities and tourist attractions in Chonburi province (Riwatthana et al., 2023) and the potential of wellness tourism in Phuket province (Klangnurak and Jaroenwisan, 2023). The results from the literature review showed that, overall, studies on wellness tourism destination competitiveness are still limited regarding Thailand.

Therefore, to fill the gap, the research question of what components and indicators comprise wellness tourism destination competitiveness assessment was developed for the present study. The research objective was to study and develop indicators for wellness tourism destination competitiveness assessment. The results can benefit stakeholders in the wellness tourism clusters in Thailand, including the health industry, tourism industry, supporting industries and public agencies or associations. Guidelines could be adapted to evaluate, improve and develop competitiveness and to improve wellness tourism destinations as high-quality and sustainable international centres for wellness tourism.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research is a qualitative study. The data were collected using documentary research from secondary data sources and the primary data sources were collected using semi-structured interviews. After reviewing concepts and related studies, we specified the basic research framework using the grounded theory-building process by Rodon and Pastor (2007), as shown in Figure 1.

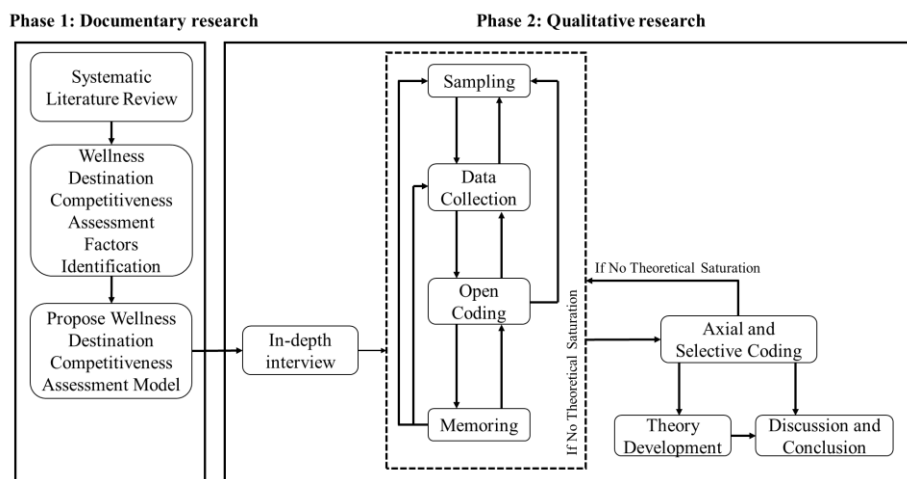


Figure 1. Research process (Source: Developed by the authors)

**Documentary research**

This study uses documents, concepts, theories and related research to specify the criteria and related indicators to determine the criteria and indicators for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness. A systematic review was employed using the PRISMA mechanism (Moher et al., 2009). We specified the research framework to conclude the data from content analysis in three issues related to research methodology, the scope of the study and factors. First, the assessment of wellness tourism destination competitiveness started with a literature review plan starting from determining the research questions regarding which factors should be focused on in the assessment. Second, we conducted a literature review by specifying important words or keywords for searching; third, we specified the time frame for searching. Research published in English from the past five years was selected. The work had to be complete versions with content related to assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness. The obtained research was of good quality regarding the research methodology; each study passed the criteria, had no bias, had complete results and had an appropriate research methodology. Moreover, the rights of the sample groups were protected according to appropriate human research ethics. The studies were retrieved from the Scopus database and the final selection was screened and assessed for quality. After conducting the above steps, 674 studies passed the inclusion criteria. We again screened the content for more specific searching and specified research studies with keywords in the research title. Studies that did not correspond to the inclusion criteria were excluded, yielding 238 studies. We then examined the abstracts and selected only those focusing on assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness concerning the wellness tourism business. Finally, 16 studies passed all the criteria, which underwent content analysis and model synthesis for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness to develop the research framework.

**Qualitative research (Semi-Structured interview)**

The basic research framework from phase 1 was used for qualitative research in phase 2. This approach allowed us to develop indicators for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness using grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This study used the interpretivism and constructivism paradigms to find the new meaning or theory from the main informants' perspectives and theoretical sampling. We began by forming the assumptions and theoretical explanations from

the data compiled specifically for the research, enabling us to develop concepts to connect reasons as temporary assumptions for use as guidelines to interview the main informants. We interviewed the informants to collect data alternating with adjusting the assumptions until the data and theoretical saturations were reached (Creswell, 1998). For example, if redundant responses with no new issues were provided, we stopped collecting data and proceeded to theoretical generalisation or theoretical explanation to reach the theoretical conclusion of the factors for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness.

### **Source of Research and the Selection of Informant**

For the qualitative research, this study selected samples using the theoretical sampling method based on the principle that the main informants were appropriate and consistent with the research objectives (Strauss and Corbi, 1998). In other words, we collected data from experts in the wellness tourism clusters using the purposive sampling method based on the research objectives. The data were from educational institutions/professional associations/institutes, public sectors driving and supporting wellness tourism promotion policies, supporting associations/agencies, full-service tourism, healthcare services with at least three years of experience in wellness tourism management and Thai and international wellness tourists travelling to a wellness tourism destination in the past year.

### **Research tools**

This study included three research instruments: the researcher, interview guide and data recording field tools.

1) The researcher was considered an important instrument in data collection. The researcher selected the main informants and collected and presented data; therefore, the researcher was the best interview instrument, must possess knowledge of the research topic, could form questions, listen and build relationships with the informants and have theoretical sensitivity. The researcher prepared by studying documents, concepts, theories and research related to assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness before preparing the interview guide developed from the basic research framework.

2) Interview guide is a question guideline for an in-depth interview with the characteristics of a semi-structured interview. The main informants were experts in the wellness tourism enterprise network who could respond with as much detail as they wanted. The researcher used question guidelines about assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness as an interview guide, which covered the research objectives and other related issues. From the components and indicators of the assessment derived from a systematic review, the questions were divided into question guidelines for basic information of the main informants and open questions about assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness from the interviewees' perspectives. The accuracy and appropriateness of the interview questions were checked using a triangulation design from three experts and scholars in the field of wellness tourism. This approach ensured content completeness and accuracy.

Field notes were collected from the online interviews for data analysis. These details included the interviewees' information, particulars of answers and opinions, observations like gestures, facial expressions, tone, personality, actions and the atmosphere during the interviews. The interview recordings were transcribed and the transcriptions were used with the field notes to review the interviews and eliminate data errors.

### **Collecting data**

The researcher coordinated with different agencies and informants in the wellness tourism enterprise networks for data collection. The research objectives, data application and privacy policy were explained to the informants so they knew about the research objectives and cooperated with the researcher. Experts in the wellness tourism enterprise network were interviewed. After the interview, the interviewees were asked to provide recommendations for additional participants, who were then contacted for later interviews. Invitation letters were sent to the participants to schedule the date and time for the interview along with the interview guide for consideration.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher introduced himself and explained the research objectives and the estimated interview duration. The researcher then asked permission to record a video clip of the interview using the Zoom meeting application; the informants could turn off their cameras if they did not want to be recorded or did not want the interview to be transcribed. The interview was conducted using the interview guide and commenced by establishing the informant's basic information, followed by questions about types, processes, criteria, decision guidelines and problems and challenges of assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness.

The process was repeated with the participants until there were no further questions. Data saturation was reached after interview 13. The interviews then ended. Key issues and observations of the interviewees' behaviours and gestures were noted and the results were reviewed and relayed to the participants. Data were collected between October 2021 and November 2021 and interview duration was between 27.39 and 101.50 minutes, with an average of 64.61 minutes.

### **Coding and data analysis**

The data were analysed using content analysis and thematic analysis based on the concept proposed by Terry et al. (2017). Nvivo 12 software was employed for data management using an inductive approach, thematic coding and weight. The details are as follows.

1) The content was examined using word-by-word transcription and repeated listenings to establish correct details from the interviews. Content and thematic analyses were performed by categorising word groups based on the indicators and components. These included analysing data obtained later from in-depth analysis for improvement, adjustments and addition of indicators and components until indicators with the same directions of story and issue could be grouped.

2) The sample groups were categorised based on the interviewees' characteristics, i.e. the categorisation of business clusters.

3) The data connection pattern was obtained by analysing the connection between the data characteristics divided by groups and the data content divided by indicators and components. The data connection was analysed for similarities and differences to compare and count the word frequency distribution from the interviewee in each data connection pattern.

4) The data connection was divided by indicators and components to synthesise and conclude patterns and count word frequency distribution mentioned by the interviewee in each category.

5) Weight of factors predicted to affect the assessment of wellness tourism destination competitiveness was analysed using quantitative data and conditioning factor analysis from the qualitative data. NVivo 12 software programme was employed to analyse text quantitatively. The data were categorised and coded by the researcher.

6) Indicators and components analysed by NVivo 12 software programme were concluded as connection patterns and developed as a model for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness.

**Reliability assessment of the research**

The researcher’s reliability assessment criteria included credibility requirements prepared using qualitative research methodology, documents, textbooks and research related to assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness. The researcher confirmed the data by examining the codes provided and discussing the rationale for coding with the research team. The researcher then brought the preliminary conclusion from the data analysis to three experts to verify their accuracy. The second criterion was transferability, in which the researcher described the participants’ detailed characteristics for application to studies in other contexts. The third and final criterion was dependability on other criteria, in which the researcher described the research methodology to the participants, starting from data collection, data analysis and research conclusion. The goal was to help readers understand and examine the study; Figure 2 illustrates this process.

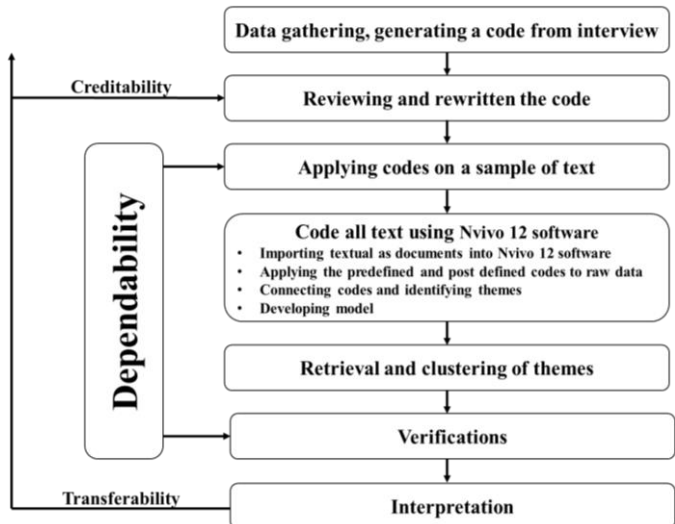


Figure 2. Research reliability assessment process (Source: Developed by the authors)

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**Results**

**Participants’ characteristics**

The participants in the present study included three representatives from the public sector driving and supporting wellness tourism, five representatives from educational institutions/professional associations/institutes, three representatives from full-service tourism and healthcare service enterprises and two wellness travellers and tourists. There were 13 participants, including 9 female and 4 male participants. They had experience working in or relating to wellness tourism between 5 and 40 years, with an average of 19.38 years. Most participants graduated with a bachelor’s degree and were employed as directors, assistant professors in education or research institutes and owners of wellness tourism businesses, or they were wellness travellers and tourists. Table 1 presents the details.

Table 1. Informants’ sociodemographic characteristics (Source: Analysed by the authors)

Cluster	Gender	Experience (Year)	Education	Position	Duration (Minutes)
Public agencies driving and supporting wellness tourism	female	33	Bachelor’s degree	Director	48.05
	female	29	Master’s degree	Director	51.49
	female	13	Bachelor’s degree	Director	72.10
Educational institutions/professional associations/institutes	Female	27	Doctoral degree	Assistant Professor	27.39
	Male	9	Doctoral degree	Assistant Professor	96.45
	Female	5	Doctoral degree	Ph.D. lecturer	48.45
	Female	16	Doctoral degree	Ph.D. lecturer	76.27
	Male	22	Doctoral degree	Assistant Professor	49.28
Full-service travelling and wellness service entrepreneurs	Male	25	Bachelor of Medicine	Wellness tourism business owner	68.16
	Female	22	Bachelor’s degree	Wellness tourism and spa business owner	101.50
	Male	40	Master’s degree	Wellness tourism business owner	95.03
Wellness travelers	Female	5	Master’s degree	Wellness traveler	48.52
	Female	6	Master’s degree	Wellness traveler	57.22

**Definition of key themes**

The data analysis from the thematic analysis revealed themes for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness. These included 1) the environment of the destination, 2) policies of the area which facilitated travelling and wellness tourism, 3) infrastructure and capability to support wellness tourism, 4) human-made resources and wellness tourism culture, 5) strategies and structure of healthcare services, 6) potential for developing innovation and 7) collaboration for collective strength and proactive marketing. The following subsection presents the details.

**Theme 1: The environment of the destination**

The participants reported that a destination should facilitate development, improvement or changes and provide local appeal to attract wellness tourists. Additionally, residents must have a good quality of life and businesses related to travelling and tourism should be easy to establish. The location should be appropriate, with readily available educational institutions. Furthermore, the political and administrative sectors should be transparent, with policies promoting investment and police stations, hospitals and healthcare services provided should cover all areas. The transportation was family, kid and disability friendly. Healthcare staff and equipment are expected to be hygienic and certified by related agencies and local people should be able and willing to communicate fluently in foreign languages. Skilled staff members should be available, along with knowledge about travelling and tourism provided by educational institutions. Suitable areas should have service-minded people and ICT infrastructures should be provided. Communication facilitating travelling and tourism activities should be supported by analogue and wireless systems supporting mobile devices, as shown in the excerpt below.

‘...For the academic part, educational institutions should be able to do this. These institutions should be bases for wellness destinations to rely on. For example, Chula or Silpakorn are strong with design institutes, so let them design about wellness. Rajabhats already worked on tourism and travelling and ancient Thai medicine, so they should expand their businesses and build permanent connections abroad. Now, my hot spring club has connections with those in all areas of Japan, with Japanese onsen associations in Osaka and Kyoto and with 18 countries in Europe. I joined a meeting and they wanted to be our sister city. They want to have a connection with our association and country, but we can do nothing because we cannot hold any conventions because Europeans do not think we are democratic. We are not that interested in this. This issue is probably taken rather superficially. I feel sorry that we never get deeper about this. So, I think institutions and departments should be hosts for this and ask for budget, be a foundation and make it continuous’. (Key informant from the full-service and wellness tourism enterprise group No. 3)

**Theme 2: Policy of the area and strategies facilitating travelling and wellness tourism**

The participants reported that for a destination to attract wellness tourists, it should be ready in terms of travelling and tourism policy and tourist attractions that facilitate the development, improvement and changes; it should also provide local appeal. Furthermore, travelling and tourism policies with international standards should be emphasised. Examples were visa policies to promote tourism and laws and regulations to protect the environment with support from public agencies in the area. International meetings should also be organised with agencies or associations and travel expenses should be specified. There should also be a tax incentive policy and the ability to use different currencies for financial transactions. Moreover, importance should be placed on environmental sustainability by organising activities for tourist participation to maintain the cleanliness of the area. Waste collection, waste management from travelling and strict compliance with environmental regulations of businesses, entrepreneurs and other related agencies should also be focused on, as presented in the excerpt below.

In 2016, the spa law was implemented. It could be considered an upward trend because, in the past, there were no clear laws. We were in the special business group and the image was that we were like massage parlours. After there were clearer laws and regulations and the medical hub policy specialising in healthcare, public and private organisations supported us. When the law is clearer, you can see that massage and spa businesses can be started more easily but with high competitiveness. When the competition is high, if you could not make it sustainable, you could not survive. We can see that there are a lot of businesses that are open and closed. So, there should be clear regulations. Regulations are good, but when put into practice, it is difficult. For example, being a service provider in the healthcare business, such as being a therapist, can you believe it? The course fee is very expensive. So, there are some places which say that this is business, so we will pay for the course and you will come back and work for me. But after receiving the certificate, they do not stay with the organisation but work for others. So, there are regulations, but the implementation is not effective. (Key informant from educational institutions/professional associations/institutes No. 3)

**Theme 3: Infrastructure and capability to support wellness tourism**

The participants reported that for a destination to attract wellness tourists, it should be ready in terms of travelling and tourism policy and tourist attractions that facilitate the development, improvement and changes; it should also provide local appeal and transportation infrastructure to connect with public transport and support international connections. The transportation networks between cities and rural areas should be high-quality and cover all areas. Road, rail and air transport should be convenient and easily accessible. Tourist centres should be established to provide information about transporting and travelling in the area; they should be easily recognisable and ready to help and facilitate tourists. Adequate facilities should also be provided for money exchange services. Adequate, high-quality and various accommodations and facilities should also be ready to support travellers. Various food and beverages should be served with high-quality and local identity and should be seasonal and healthy. Furthermore, the area should be able to hold recreational and entertainment activities in line with the local identity, for example, local fairs, events and sports events with local themes. The excerpt below provides additional details.

‘I need to tell the researcher that this is my own personal opinion. It might be different from others. I don’t think that the most civilised or comfortable place was the destination for wellness tourism. I try to take into account different contexts. Sometimes we talk about the structure. Some places are very difficult to travel to, but people are willing to cross the water to the islands to visit that place, whereas some places are already in the cities. Some issues are difficult to talk about because it is the structural analysis of the country. Thailand and tourism are macro destinations covering a very wide picture. In Thailand, some provinces are very popular and contain many hidden wellness destinations, with some as stand-alone places. If we think about the northern region, we might think about one, two or three places, but there are many places in the southern

area. These, for us, become a limitation. Our country is a macro destination. In terms of tourism, there are a variety of tourist attractions, but they are far apart and difficult to connect. So, when we talk about structure, I would ask first about travelling and transportation accessibility. I think if we were to be serious, the transportation might not have to be very comfortable but should be easily accessible. The second point about structure is the signs; there should be details telling how each point is connected. We already have cars and signs, so I would cut the point of transportation quality off. I believe this is difficult to say, so I would skip this first because it is very difficult to develop. In the end, we would come back to the preparation to support tourists. You must have good infrastructure. Flowing water and bright light are the first things. Telephone signals should support a certain number of people. This is a tourist attraction or destination. You must prepare the basic infrastructure to serve this'. (Key informant from educational institutions/professional associations/institutes No. 2).

#### **Theme 4: Human-made resources and culture for wellness tourism**

The participants reported that for a destination to attract wellness tourists, it should be ready in terms of wellness tourism and tourist attractions that facilitate the development, improvement and changes; it should also provide local appeal, beautiful nature with biodiversity, culture and local knowledge and resources to support human-made wellness tourism. These included abundant natural resources to support wellness tourism, such as hot springs, rivers and canals. There should also be outstanding history, culture, buildings, local knowledge, facilities and resources supporting the development of tourist attractions or routes. New activities should be held to respond to wellness tourists' needs with businesses relating to wellness tourism, such as wellness hotels, thalassotherapy centres, yoga centres, sporting facilities, spas and wellness centres and excellent recreation facilities. These expectations are illustrated in the excerpt below.

'For tourism in the area of my responsibility, we are ready in terms of culture, natural tourist attractions and art and culture. This could be therapy for the tourists and make them feel that, by coming to Chiang Rai, they are healthier. Some tourists come for treatment. They stay in hospitals and get treatment. In their free time, they might go for therapy and travel to different places in Chiang Rai for better health. About herbal food some communities offer herbal food to tourists. These places are also beautiful and attractive to tourists. They are impressed and have no complaints. Now, there is an ancient Lanna medical massage offered. There are local knowledge learning centres where tourists could pay a visit when they have pains and aches. It is Lanna tapping line or hammer massage using hammer tapping on the body for relaxation and treatment. The locals gather as a group to treat patients. There are also therapists who use sesame oil, step on the tail, press with hot water and step on the body for relaxation. They do this quite well. So, we have resources or local identity which we can choose and use for developing new things and creating many new wellness products'. (Key informant from the government agency driving and supporting wellness tourism No. 2).

#### **Theme 5: Strategies and structure for health-promoted services**

The participants reported that for a destination to attract wellness tourists, it should be ready in terms of strategic planning to develop and improve wellness tourism and tourist attraction and present health-promoted treatment activities to attract wellness tourists. Furthermore, importance should be placed on delivering high-quality treatment services by experts, as modern technology and equipment can provide a satisfying experience for customers. Services in compliance with international medical and healthcare standards and with wellness tourism awards and certifications should be developed. Products, services, activities and other components of wellness tourism should also be connected with tourists who travel to the destination. Furthermore, the destination must be ready with areas and tourist attractions which could support all wellness activities, such as nutrition therapy, exercise, meditation, hydrotherapy, mental rejuvenation and physical and aesthetic treatment, as presented in the excerpt below.

'We are ready whether it be culture, natural tourist attractions and art and culture. These could be therapy for tourists to make them feel that when they visit Chiang Rai, they are healthier. This is what we call mind and soul therapy. They could learn about the lifestyle there and about homestay, which is interesting for some of them. There are also cafés and farm stays where local and chemical-free food is served. This is the main selling point to invite tourists to the area. Some set up a camp and learn about different things. On the Ruenrom farm, there are DIY activities where they can dye cloths, make salted eggs, visit vegetable farms and learn how to reduce energy use. These tourists are interested in these, especially in winter. They would come to relax and learn about organic farming and join activities with the Ruenrom farm. Some groups are specifically interested in activities on farms. If they receive prizes, we will especially support them because, at least, we praise those who do good for tourism. We need to think whether the entrepreneurs have ever been to that point or received any awards. These serve as a guarantee for the government sector, which deals with this directly. In addition, there are also activities in the temples, medication and catering. We placed importance on these things. How can the hotels connect to one another to support the tourists, for example, when COVID-19 cases are found, or how can we transfer the tourists to the hospital and help them fast enough? This is to build trust'.

'...for example the Pangha community in the Maesai district, there are facial spas and masks. It is a tourist community with homestays and tourist attractions in the area. In the Pangha community, there is a place which is popular among tourists called Khun Jindarat, whose business is mulberry paper making. Tourists can make mulberry paper and mulberry paper bags. There are also DIY activities for tourists to draw pictures on mulberry paper and decorate it with flowers. There is also a part about aesthetic wellness with products named CO. Extracted honey is used in cosmetic products. Tourists can do facial and honey facial masks. This is another community working in this area and succeeding. They continually develop from two to three beds. The main thing is the service mind and the customers are always impressed every time they visit. There are activities for tourists which are enjoyable and fun. Meditation activities are also available at the

Chuentawan Farm by V. Vajiramedhi. Mind and meditation practices and how to find happiness in life are taught by V. Vajiramedhi. The place is well-decorated and there are his teachings displayed on every corner. There are also courses offered. Tourists enjoy going there to pray, listen to his teachings and practice walking meditation. He is still running the place. This is also interesting'. (Key informant from the government agency driving and supporting wellness tourism No. 2)

#### **Theme 6: Potential for developing innovation**

The participants reported that for a destination to attract wellness tourists, it should be ready to create or present new health-promoted products or services that appeal to wellness tourists. Furthermore, knowledge for developing new products or services and activities and components of wellness tourism which could respond to the customers' needs is required. Staff should be ready to develop new products and services, have expertise in wellness tourism and creativity and have the passion to develop new products or services. They should be able to apply and adopt new technology currently on trend or emerging to improve their ability to create or present new wellness products or services that differ from competitors. Preparation and new methods for solving problems or complaints regarding the delivery of health-promoted services should be conducted regularly and continuously. These methods also include the ability to utilise resources in the community, local knowledge and distinctive local identity to develop selling points and add value to wellness products or services, as illustrated in the excerpt below.

'...Actually, in terms of health, local materials found in the area could be used and adapted so that they can be used in the local area and become its identity. This is better than imitating others'.

(Key informant from the government agency driving and supporting wellness tourism No. 1)

'...We say there are many styles of wellness tourism. For Thai local knowledge, we have Thai medicine scholars, which is good. So, if local people have the know-how or knowledge which has been developed from the past, as in the southern part I used to visit, there are Manorah massages using a stick. That is very good'.

(Key informant from education institutions/professional associations/institutions No. 1)

'...The most important thing may be local knowledge in the area. It might be considered old, but if you look at the old things and add in creativity, they will become new things. Therefore, for the local knowledge in the area, as I said, each area has different healthcare methods. So, the more you know about your roots, the more you can develop your business. For the local knowledge we have today, we can use the methods people used to do'.

(Key informant from educational institutions/professional associations/institutes No. 3)

#### **Theme 7: Cooperation for collaborative strengths and proactive marketing**

The informants reported that for a destination to be ready in terms of collaborative strengths and proactive marketing, it should specify a clear position and targeted customers to attract wellness tourists. Furthermore, it should emphasise establishing business networks or groups of people who are business allies in the form of clusters to work collaboratively. These could be cooperative endeavours between public and private agencies or collaborations with wellness tourism or medical agencies. Local communities should have the opportunities or receive support to participate in planning to develop wellness tourism. Moreover, importance should be placed on marketing wellness products and services in the clusters by creating and presenting the destination branding to be more attractive and memorable than competitors. Regional, national and international activities, events and marketing campaigns promoting wellness tourism in which the community could participate and help promote local employment should be organised. Connections between advertisements and publications and online wellness social media should be encouraged. Furthermore, technology should be used to simulate the surroundings of the actual places for the target groups, customers and potential customers to experience, understand and visualise the destination. Shared values should be formed and the tourists can generate content, such as via online reviews and satisfaction scoring through online channels, as illustrated in the excerpt below.

'...The entrepreneurs themselves and collaboration between public and private sectors are important for matters related to the environment. If there is a provincial policy to promote wellness destinations with plans and strategies to support this directly, they should be integrated with those of the private sector who offer products related to wellness tourism and let them develop their staff and facilities, educate them and be a good host. As for the entrepreneurs, they could respond to the customers' needs. Collaboration between public and private sectors; for example, the collaboration between wellness hospitals is something that should be done. There are many agencies that help us develop the community. They develop products that the community can sell. These include the provincial office of commercial affairs and the provincial administration office. I tell them that there is this culture. It is like our network. For the cultural aspect, they join cultural competitions. Whether it be going to the temples or meditation, they are culture related. For all these three to four things that I mentioned, if they collaborate, develop, integrate and exchange information or talk to one another and decide which items could be publicised. I will pick that up and publicise it. Every sector is related'.

(Key informant from the public sector driving and supporting wellness tourist No. 2)

'...It is better to have collaborative marketing. We do collaborative marketing in the area that I am responsible for. Wellness tourism in this area is not that outstanding, but we have different interesting spots. We have a salt spa here and healthy food here. This is a tourist attraction in the community with herbal plants and cultural tourism. So, there are spots here and there. If you ask about the design or recommendation to sell to the tourists, we will demonstrate that these are possible routes. If you visit this place, you can try two massages and two spas. Another recommendation is about alliance and network. If you ask about online learning, I will say it is possible. Online PR is also recommended, or it can be publicised to a group of tourists or an elderly family group. This is a network connecting with other tourist attractions. For example, the Abhaibhubejhr brand is already very strong, but wellness tourism brands are not. There are very few wellness



tourism spots in an area based on statistics, so this customer group is not that significant when compared to adventure tourism or seminar tourism or paying respect to the Buddha, but it has increased and expanded well. More wellness tourism products are used'. (Key informant from the public sector driving and supporting wellness tourism No. 3)

The participants' analysis results of themes and frequency of words related to the components of assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness are depicted in a hierarchy chart (Figure 3). Figure 3 presents the main theme and frequency of words the informants mentioned or referenced using colours and areas in the pictures to reflect the hierarchy of importance and numbers of sayings regarding the assessment of wellness tourism destination competitiveness. The themes of cooperation for collaborative strengths and proactive marketing were mentioned and referenced most, with 178 references (brown). The environment of the destination followed at 176 references (blue), strategies and health-promoted structure at 175 References (green), the potential for developing innovation at 119 references (red area), human-made and cultural resources for wellness tourism (yellow) and infrastructure and ability to support wellness tourism (grey) at 114 references each and the area's policy and strategies to facilitate travelling and wellness tourism at 109 references (orange).

The content and themes were analysed to present the sub-themes. Using the hierarchy chart technique, they were developed as indicators for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness. The results from the analysis showed that 1) the theme of cooperation for collaborative strengths and proactive marketing consisted of nine sub-themes. Furthermore, 2) the destination's environment consisted of six sub-themes and 3) strategies and health-promoted structure consisted of eight sub-themes. Additionally, 4) potential for developing innovation consisted of five sub-themes, 5) human-made and culture resources for wellness tourism consisted of four sub-themes, 6) basic structure and ability support wellness tourism consisted of five sub-themes and 7) policies of the area and strategies to facilitate travelling and wellness tourism consisted of four sub-themes. Figure 4 illustrates these results.



Figure 3. The main themes of the overall components of assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness via the Hierarchy chart technique (Source: Retrieved from NVivo 12 software)

<b>Theme 7: Cooperation for collaborative strengths and proactive marketing</b>				<b>Theme 1: The environment of the destination</b>		<b>Theme 4: Human-made resources and culture for wellness tourism</b>		<b>Theme 3: Infrastructure and capability to support wellness tourism</b>	
3) collaboration between public and private agencies	7) marketing communication to advertise and publicise using wellness online social media	4) partnership for marketing of wellness tourism products and services with public and private agencies at the local, national and international levels		1) business environment to support wellness tourism businesses		3) resources that facilitated the development of new tourist attractions, routes or activities to meet the wellness tourists' needs		2) readiness of tourist attractions for cultural and local knowledge tourism	
2) the creation of opportunities or support for the local community to take part in planning about wellness tourism	5) branding destinations that are attractive to tourists		9) co-creation of values	2) safety and security	6) readiness in information and communication technology	1) readiness of tourist attractions for natural tourism		4) readiness of resources to promote wellness tourists' health	
1) the establishment of clusters to work collaboratively and communicate to every group of stakeholders	6) branding of the destination to be more memorable than its competitors		8) simulation of a real environment for the target group, customers and those who were interested in experiencing, understanding and visualising the wellness destination more clearly	5) readiness of human resources in hosting wellness tourists	3) healthcare and hygiene management	2) basic structure of transportation to support wellness tourism		4) ability to support food and beverages	
<b>Theme 5: Strategies and structure for health-promoted services</b>				4) readiness of human resources in the enterprise or wellness tourism business whose duty was to deliver products and services to tourists		3) ability to support services and tourism		5) ability to support recreations and entertainment	
8) promotion of local lifestyle learning activities	7) promotion of mental wellness activities	5) promotion of activities related to health and beauty therapy	3) strategy planning for customers' satisfactory experience	<b>Theme 6: Potential for developing innovation</b>		<b>Theme 2: Policy of the area and strategies facilitating travelling and wellness tourism</b>			
4) connection of services, activities and other components of wellness tourism to travellers who visited the destination	1) strategies to develop service and treatment quality		6) promotion of physical wellness activities	4) openness to service innovation	2) knowledge to respond to the customers or tourists at the highest level	1) knowledge for developing new products and services, including activities and other components of wellness tourism		4) experiences that promote and maintain the destination environment	
2) promotion for well-known and awarded tourist attractions	6) promotion of physical wellness activities		3) human capital to develop new wellness tourism products and services	5) creation of new services or products using local resources based on outstanding local knowledge and identity		3) the ability to specify wellness product prices and services		1) the importance of travelling, tourism and wellness services	
								2) openness to international tourists to promote wellness tourism	

Figure 4. The main themes of the components for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness and sub-themes when analysed by hierarchy chart technique (Source: Retrieved from NVivo 12 software)

## DISCUSSION

Results from the data analysis showed that participants most mentioned cooperation for collaborative strength and proactive marketing. These terms were followed by the environment of the destination, strategies and structure of health-

promoted services, the potential for developing innovation, human-made resources and culture for wellness tourism, the basic structure and ability to support wellness tourism and policy of the area and strategies to facilitate travelling and wellness tourism respectively. These terms reflected the interviewees' perspectives; an area or tourist attraction aiming to be a wellness destination must be ready to cooperate for collaborative strengths and proactive marketing to identify and communicate to the target customers. This finding was in line with a study by Altinay and Kozak (2021), who found that collaborating with business partnerships in the destination or area to advertise safe and hygienic health-promoting services to tourists led to competitive advantages for the destination. Bogale and Wondirad (2019) and Petrović et al. (2018) indicated that collaboration to develop wellness tourism should include integrated cooperation among public agencies, the service, public and educational industry sectors and private agencies to enable collaboration for successful proactive marketing and to respond to the tourists' needs and satisfaction. Furthermore, Dias et al. (2021) pointed out that collaborative marketing promotion to communicate to the marketing target using clusters was a strategy that helped stimulate and attract tourists to decide to travel and relax in the area or destination. These findings also align with Goal 17 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2020), which focuses on the formation of partnerships to achieve the goals. Therefore, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on improving wellness tourism governance, strengthen private/public partnerships and engage multiple stakeholders at international, national, regional and local levels. Implementation of these activities can better inform wellness tourism cluster stakeholders on how to achieve the sustainability objectives consistent with the SDGs.

Moreover, areas or tourist attractions that facilitate development, improvement and changes and the local area's appeal could encourage wellness tourists to visit. This finding was consistent with Akin et al. (2021), who found that the destination's overall image, the expertise of staff in tourism and services and business expertise in providing wellness tourism services were important factors in promoting the destination, thereby improving competitiveness. Altinay and Kozak (2021), Armis and Kanegae (2021), Ferreira and Perks (2020) and Woyo and Slabbert (2021) emphasised the importance of tourists' personal safety and hygienic healthcare services at the destination. Furthermore, Bogale and Wondirad (2019), Gajić et al. (2018), Mustafa et al. (2021), and Neto et al. (2020) found that an area or destination with educational institutions providing knowledge about wellness tourism administration and management, hospitals and businesses providing healthcare services, friendliness of the local people (Petrović et al., 2018; Woyo and Slabbert, 2021) and local telecommunications were important factors in attracting wellness tourists, which could improve the destination's competitiveness. These findings also align with Goal 4 of the SDGs, which focuses on quality education.

Thus, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on human capital development, especially the skills of wellness tourism operators and the capabilities of trained personnel to meet customer needs. Experienced and knowledgeable staff will support wellness tourism across all sectors of the industry. The provision of wellness tourism quality education, with employment opportunities for youths, women and minority groups through in-house skill development training courses is essential to deliver wellness products and services to tourists. Goal 6 focuses on clean water and sanitation. Hence, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on providing related infrastructure to achieve clean water access, security and pollution control technology. Goal 16 focuses on peace, justice and strong institutions. Wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on engaging local communities to foster tolerance and understanding between people of different cultures and ensure that the local people are ready to host wellness tourists. Implementation of these activities can better inform wellness tourism cluster stakeholders on how to achieve the sustainability objectives consistent with the SDGs.

An area or a tourist attraction operating as a wellness tourism destination must be ready for strategic planning to develop and improve wellness tourism services and present health-promoted activities to attract wellness tourists. This finding is in line with a study by Bogale and Wondirad (2019), who found that hydrotherapy, cooking and certified health-promoted services were important factors in promoting the tourists' satisfaction and revisit intent. Ferreira and Perks (2020), Gajić et al. (2018), Goffi and Cucculelli (2019), and Neto et al. (2020) suggested that the health-promoted quality of service and satisfactory experience of the tourists were essential, while Lee and Li (2019) proposed health-promoted therapy activities and healthy food. Moreover, Milićević et al. (2020) and Mustafa et al. (2021) demonstrated that various and high-quality health-promoted activities, i.e. spas and wellness activities, could help develop and improve wellness tourism. Endorsing health-promoting activities could also help attract wellness tourists to visit the attractions or areas.

These findings align with Goal 3 of the SDGs, which focuses on good health and well-being. Wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on establishing the public health infrastructure required for tourists that will also benefit local communities. Wellness tourism-related activities such as adventure sports, recreation and sightseeing will also promote the physical and mental health of the local community members. Goal 4 focuses on quality education. Wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must also focus on increasing educational achievements to develop a skilled workforce through in-house skill development training courses to transfer knowledge and deliver quality service to ensure satisfactory tourist experiences. Implementation of these activities can better inform wellness tourism cluster stakeholders on how to achieve the sustainability objectives consistent with the SDGs.

Such wellness destinations had to prioritise developing and improving creative ability and presentation of new wellness products or services to promote the destination and attract wellness tourists to decide to visit those places. This result was in line with Altinay and Kozak (2021), who revealed the importance of technology adoption and digital service experience. The results were also consistent with a study by Bogale and Wondirad (2019), who demonstrated that increasing the capability and service quality of health-promoted businesses or organisations could help attract visitors. Moreover, Dias et al. (2021) and Rucci et al. (2021) reported that the creative ability and presentation of new services that could respond to

the targeted customers' needs were crucial. Font et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of knowledge about services and improvement of quality for health-promoted services, the ability to adopt those to improve wellness services for tourists and the use of local resources to increase the economic value of wellness products and services to make them more outstanding (Goffi and Cucculelli, 2019). These findings align with Goal 1 of the SDGs, which focuses on the eradication of poverty, Goal 2, which focuses on the elimination of hunger and Goal 10, which focuses on reducing inequalities. Wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destinations must focus on engaging the local population to create jobs and income. Local resources can be developed into new wellness products or services to promote a more resilient agricultural sector. Goal 8 focuses on decent work and economic growth. Hence, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destinations must focus on educating the local people with skills through lifelong learning to increase the productivity of wellness tourism and respond to the needs of the tourists at the highest level by creating novel wellness tourism product activities. Goal 9 focuses on industry, innovation and infrastructure. Therefore, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destinations must focus on supporting community infrastructure development. Wellness products or services must be novel, sustainable, innovative and resource-efficient while reducing the carbon footprint. Implementation of these activities can better inform wellness tourism cluster stakeholders on how to achieve the sustainability objectives consistent with the SDGs.

The area or tourist attraction and its surroundings must be ready concerning natural resources, culture and unique local knowledge. Such areas should be outstanding and facilitate the development, improvement or changes pertaining to wellness tourism, including the local area's appeal, which could promote the destination to attract wellness tourists. This was consistent with studies by Akin et al. (2021), Armis and Kanegae (2021), Bogale and Wondirad (2019), Ferreira and Perks (2020), Mustafa et al. (2021) and Woyo and Slabbert (2021), who found an area with abundant natural resources, exquisite sceneries, human-made natural tourist attractions in harmony with the nature, outstanding architecture with unique local identity and variety of culture and tradition (Dos Anjos and Da Rosa, 2021; Goffi and Cucculelli, 2019; Hernández-Rojas et al., 2021; Wardana et al., 2019). Gajić et al. (2018) and Petrović et al. (2018) emphasised the preparation of adequate medical or wellness service facilities for tourists' needs, such as state-to-the-art equipment. Furthermore, various resources facilitating new styles of wellness tourism could promote development, improvement or changes in the area or tourist attraction, creating a competitive advantage and attracting more tourists.

These findings align with Goal 11 of the SDGs, which focuses on sustainable cities and communities. Hence, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on regenerating and preserving cultural and natural heritage assets to promote wellness tourism and enhance the opportunities to live in safer and cleaner communities. Goal 15 focuses on life on land. Thus, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on developing new routes or activities to meet the demands of wellness tourists, while also conserving and preserving biodiversity and generating revenue as an alternative livelihood for the local communities. Goal 8 focuses on decent work and economic growth. To fulfill this objective, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist attraction areas must focus on providing decent work opportunities by optimising natural resources, culture and unique local knowledge to facilitate new styles of wellness tourism. Implementation of these activities can better inform wellness tourism cluster stakeholders on how to achieve the sustainability objectives consistent with the SDGs.

Wellness destinations should be ready in terms of travelling infrastructure and facilities for tourists and should also serve various needs for services. These findings were consistent with studies by Akin et al. (2021), Armis and Kanegae (2021), Dos Anjos and Da Rosa (2021), Ferreira and Perks (2020), Martín-González et al. (2021), Milićević et al. (2020), Mustafa et al. (2021), Neto et al. (2020) and Petrović et al. (2018), who reported about various types of transportation infrastructure in the area or tourist attraction which connected and covered all areas. Armis and Kanegae (2021), Ferreira and Perks (2020), Goffi and Cucculelli (2019), Martín-González et al. (2021) and Mustafa et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of serving tourists in terms of accommodations. Moreover, Akin et al. (2021), Armis and Kanegae (2021), Bogale and Wondirad (2019), Milićević et al. (2020) and Neto et al. (2020) indicated the significance of news services, suggestions about wellness tourism and infrastructure facilities of the area and its surroundings through offline and online channels. Akin et al. (2021), Armis and Kanegae (2021), Bogale and Wondirad (2019), Goffi and Cucculelli (2019),

Milićević et al. (2020) and Neto et al. (2020) also reported that the variety of entertainment activities, such as nighttime activities, art exhibitions, films, special activities or events, sports events and readiness for food and drinks services could help attract tourists (Armis and Kanegae, 2021; Bogale and Wondirad, 2019; Ferreira and Perks, 2020; Goffi and Cucculelli, 2019; Mustafa et al., 2021; Woyo and Slabbert, 2021). The readiness of travel infrastructure and convenience for tourists could also help attract more wellness tourists. These findings align with Goal 3 of the SDGs, which focuses on good health and well-being and Goal 9, which focuses on industry, innovation and infrastructure.

Wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destination areas must, therefore, focus on health-related wellness tourism infrastructure, including facilities specifically devoted to health and well-being improvement such as health farms and spa resorts. These facilities should be accessible to local residents as well as tourists to promote activities such as adventure sports, recreation and local lifestyle learning. Goal 11 focuses on sustainable cities and communities. To achieve this goal, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destination areas must focus on advanced wellness infrastructure and accessibility. Investment in green infrastructure will promote smarter and greener destinations for the enjoyment of residents and wellness tourists alike. Implementation of these activities can better inform wellness tourism cluster stakeholders on how to achieve the sustainability objectives consistent with the SDGs.

Moreover, wellness destinations must place importance on determining policies about travelling and tourism to facilitate travel, tourism and wellness services. These include creating environmentally friendly experiences at wellness destinations to attract wellness tourists. The results were in line with a study by Altinay and Kozak (2021), who reported on

the promotion of wellness tourism policy in the area by the public and related supporting agencies. Akin et al. (2021), Dias et al. (2021) and Neto et al. (2020) found that openness to international tourists by facilitating visa application, customs clearance and expedited immigration process was critical. Financial institutions and currency exchange should also be facilitated and adequate for tourists (Bogale and Wondirad, 2019; Gajić et al., 2018; Mustafa et al., 2021). Furthermore, Akin et al. (2021), Armis and Kanegae (2021), Goffi and Cucculelli (2019), Milićević et al. (2020) and Neto et al. (2020) indicated the ability to specify multilevel and reasonable prices of wellness tourism products and services were important factors. Dos Anjos and Da Rosa (2021), Ferreira and Perks (2020), Gajić et al. (2018), Goffi and Cucculelli (2019), Liu et al. (2021), Martín-González et al. (2021), Mustafa et al. (2021) and Neto et al. (2020) showed that sustainable, environmentally friendly experiences could promote quality of life for people in the area were indicators of policies for attracting tourists. These findings align with Goal 7 of the SDGs, which focuses on affordable and clean energy.

Therefore, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destination areas must promote investments in clean energy sources. This will reduce greenhouse gases, mitigate the effect of climate change and contribute to energy access for all. Goal 12 focuses on responsible consumption and production, while Goal 13 focuses on climate action. Wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destination areas must, therefore, adopt sustainable consumption and production modes. Green environmentally friendly wellness tourism activities such as eco wellness tourism will promote conservation and deliver socio-economic benefits. Wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destination areas must take the lead and adopt strategies that both promote and maintain the destination environment. Goal 8 focuses on decent work and economic growth. Consequently, wellness tourism cluster stakeholders in tourist destination areas must focus on setting policies that best facilitate travelling, tourism and services to promote wellness tourism and offer specific wellness products at competitive prices. Implementation of these activities can better inform wellness tourism cluster stakeholders on how to achieve the sustainability objectives consistent with the SDGs.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the framework for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness from the data analysis included 1) the destination's environment, 2) the area's policy and strategy to facilitate the travelling and wellness tourism, 3) the basic structure and capability to support wellness tourism, 4) human-made resources and culture of wellness tourism, 5) strategy and structure of health-promoted services, 6) potential for developing innovation and 7) cooperation for collaborative strengths and proactive marketing. Conversely, results from the data analysis and themes for presenting the sub-themes were developed as indicators for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness using the hierarchy chart technique. It was found that **the theme of the environment of the destination** comprised six sub-themes: 1) business environment to support wellness tourism businesses; 2) safety and security; 3) healthcare and hygiene management; 4) readiness of human resources in the enterprise or wellness tourism business whose duty was to deliver products and services to tourists; 5) readiness of human resources in hosting wellness tourists; and 6) readiness in information and communication technology. **The theme of the policy of the area and strategy which facilitated travelling and wellness tourism** comprised four sub-themes: 1) the importance of travelling, tourism and wellness services; 2) openness to international tourists to promote wellness tourism; 3) the ability to specify wellness product prices and services; and 4) experiences that promote and maintain the destination environment.

**The theme of infrastructure and capability to support wellness tourism** included five sub-themes: 1) basic structure of transportation to support wellness tourism; 2) basic structure to support services and tourism; 3) ability to support venues, accommodations and facilities; 4) ability to support food and beverages; and 5) ability to support recreations and entertainment. **The theme of human-made resources and culture of wellness tourism** consisted of four sub-themes: 1) readiness of tourist attractions for natural tourism; 2) readiness of tourist attractions for cultural and local knowledge tourism; 3) resources that facilitated the development of new tourist attractions, routes or activities to meet the wellness tourists' needs; and 4) readiness of resources to promote wellness tourists' health. **The theme of strategy and structure for healthcare services** comprised eight sub-themes: 1) strategies to develop service and treatment quality; 2) promotion for well-known and awarded tourist attractions; 3) strategy planning for customers' satisfactory experience; 4) connection of services, activities and other components of wellness tourism to travellers who visited the destination; 5) promotion of activities related to health and beauty therapy; 6) promotion of physical wellness activities; 7) promotion of mental wellness activities; and 8) promotion of local lifestyle learning activities.

**The theme of potential for developing innovation** included five sub-themes: 1) knowledge for developing new products and services, including activities and other components of wellness tourism; 2) knowledge to respond to the customers or tourists at the highest level; 3) human capital to develop new wellness tourism products and services; 4) openness to service innovation; and 5) creation of new services or products using local resources based on outstanding local knowledge and identity. **The theme of cooperation to build collaborative strengths and proactive marketing** included nine sub-themes: 1) the establishment of clusters to work collaboratively and communicate to every group of stakeholders; 2) the creation of opportunities or support for the local community to take part in planning about wellness tourism; 3) collaboration between public and private agencies; 4) partnership for marketing of wellness tourism products and services with public and private agencies at the local, national and international levels; 5) branding destinations that are attractive to tourists; 6) branding of the destination to be more memorable than its competitors; 7) marketing communication to advertise and publicise using wellness online social media; 8) simulation of a real environment for the target group, customers and those who were interested in experiencing, understanding and visualising the wellness destination more clearly; and 9) co-creation of values. This information is summarised in Figure 5.

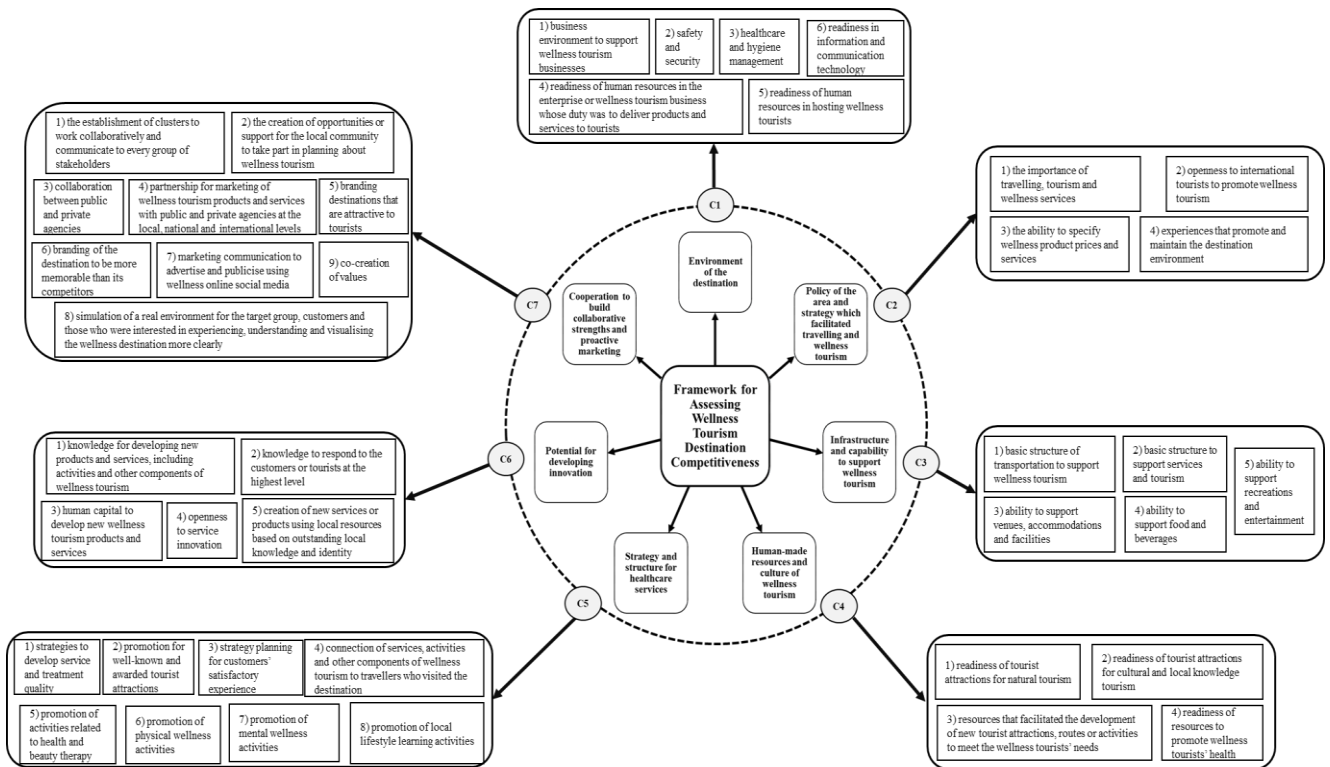


Figure 5. The proposed framework for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness (Source: Developed by the authors)

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Implications

This research provided important components and indicators that could be applied to extend the results of the present study and develop knowledge to increase wellness tourism destination competitiveness. It could also inform about the components and indicators in developing wellness tourism destination competitiveness which would be beneficial for suggestions to stakeholders in Thailand's wellness tourism clusters, which were the healthcare industry, tourism industry and public and private agencies. The study indicates which factors are considered important for improving wellness tourism destination competitiveness to upgrade the destination, compete internationally, policies of the area and strategies facilitating travelling and wellness tourism, infrastructure and ability to support wellness tourism, human-made resources and culture for wellness tourism, health-promoted strategies and structure, the potential to develop innovation and collaboration for collective strengths. These might be effectively applied to other similar projects.

### Recommendation for future research

This research developed a basic research framework from a systemic review of related previous studies concerning the components of assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness. This study also conducted qualitative research to develop indicators using grounded theory methodology from interviews with participants related to the wellness tourism clusters in Thailand. Future research might employ quantitative research to confirm the model to assess wellness tourism destination competitiveness. The data from this study could also be used to develop assessment criteria weight for assessing wellness tourism destination competitiveness or as a support system for decision-making through a mobile or web-based application. These could be used to administer, compare and specify strategies to develop the competitiveness of the wellness tourism destination. This approach could facilitate and support the decision and uplevel sustainable competitiveness ability of entrepreneurs in the clusters, public and private agencies and stakeholders related to the wellness tourism industry in the future.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available, as respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity in this study.

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