

## A Path Analysis of the Influence of Customer Experience and Brand Prestige on Chinese Visitor Loyalty in Luxury Wellness Service

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### ABSTRACT

Luxury wellness travel plays an important role in Thailand's tourism trends, due to its challenge to satisfy the desire of Chinese tourists' prestige preference into their relaxation. This study proposes a hypothesized path analysis on the measurement of luxury wellness experiences and associates such experiences to brand prestige, functional and emotional benefits, and loyalty. Data were gathered from 200 Chinese tourists who had visited Thailand's luxury wellness resorts using a web-based survey. By conducting path analysis to test direct and indirect effects among factors, the results from path analysis was shown that education, esthetics, and escapism experiences were positively influenced customer loyalty. Furthermore, brand prestige was found to be an important variable which is a positively direct and indirect relationship on a loyalty. In conclusion, dominant implications of the findings were indicated for satisfying Chinese visitors, and they will turn to be more loyal to luxury wellness providers.

**Keywords:** Path Analysis, Luxury Wellness Service, Tourist Experience, Brand Prestige, Customer Loyalty

## การวิเคราะห์เส้นทางอิทธิพลของประสบการณ์ลูกค้า และชื่อเสียงของแบรนด์ต่อความภักดีของลูกค้าชาวจีน ในการให้บริการหรรดูด้านสุขภาพองค์รวม

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทบาการท่องเที่ยวยแบบหรรดูที่เน้นสุขภาพโดยรวมมีบทบาทสำคัญในแผนการพัฒนาการท่องเที่ยวของประเทศไทย เนื่องจากความท้าทายในการสนองความต้องการของนักท่องเที่ยวชาวจีนที่ชื่นชอบการพักผ่อนแบบมีระดับ การศึกษาครั้งนี้นำเสนอการวิเคราะห์เส้นทางบนสมมติฐาน ในการศึกษาประสบการณ์ในการท่องเที่ยวแบบหรรดูที่เน้นสุขภาพโดยรวมกับชื่อเสียงของแบรนด์ คุณประโยชน์ด้านการใช้สอยและด้านอารมณ์ความรู้สึกและความจงรักภักดี ข้อมูลที่รวบรวมในการวิจัยครั้งนี้มาจากนักท่องเที่ยวชาวจีนที่เคยใช้สถานบริการหรรดูให้บริการในการดูแลสุขภาพ จำนวน 200 คน โดยใช้แบบสำรวจออนไลน์ การวิเคราะห์เส้นทาง เพื่อทดสอบผลกระทบทั้งทางตรงและทางอ้อมในปัจจัยต่าง ๆ ผลจากการวิเคราะห์เส้นทางพบว่า ประสบการณ์ด้านการหาความรู้ ด้านสุนทรียภาพ ด้านการหนีความจริงมีอิทธิพลในเชิงบวกต่อความภักดี นอกจากนี้ชื่อเสียงของแบรนด์เป็นตัวแปรสำคัญ ซึ่งมีความสัมพันธ์ทั้งทางตรงและทางอ้อมต่อความภักดี ในตอนท้ายได้นำเสนอข้อเสนอแนะที่สำคัญจากผลการศึกษา เพื่อสร้างความพึงพอใจสำหรับนักท่องเที่ยวจีน และจะทำให้เกิดลูกค้าที่มีความจงรักภักดีต่อผู้ให้บริการหรรดูด้านสุขภาพมากขึ้น

**คำสำคัญ:** การวิเคราะห์เส้นทาง บริการหรรดูด้านสุขภาพองค์รวม ประสบการณ์ของนักท่องเที่ยว ชื่อเสียงของแบรนด์ ความภักดีของลูกค้า

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wellness is defined as “the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health” (Global Wellness Institute, 2018), where travelers would get a highly personal touch and convenience in luxurious travel experiences with elite inclusions tailored from each destination. Well-known luxury hotel brands, spa treatment, adrenaline thrills, food adventures and luxury add-ons are provided to ensure the ultimate turn-key travel experience. With the rise of the global wellness industry, luxurious spa hotels are the rising stars of this sector that generates an important contribution to the growth in nation’s income. While Thailand is considered as one of the world’s top spa destinations that have brought the personal touch to vacations for the art of wellness, the information provided by The Global Wellness Institute (2018), Thailand’s spa industry is projected to grow by 8% per year between 2015 to 2020.

With many great Thai hotel spas and certified massage therapists, Thailand has been definitely considered as a spa destination, many Chinese visitors spend a lot of money to find luxury spa resorts as they seek refreshment on holiday for health, relaxation and detoxification before going back to work. They are the main source of income for Thailand’s wellness tourism sector (SCB Economic Excellence Center, 2018). As China’s rapid economic growth over 20 years, Chinese income levels increase and the living standard improves, where the people are better-educated increasingly with higher life satisfaction. A large number of Chinese travelers take luxurious spas because they would like to achieve pleasurable experiences of a well-known spa where it can be reflected a signal of social status (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). In other words, taking a luxurious wellness resort can express a more distinctive value of self-concept (Hung & Petrick, 2011). Luxury seeking consumers are willing to pay for a premium service to get luxurious experiences from a prestigious brand (Hwang & Hyun, 2012). In addition, they will later show a strong patron to such a brand (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). Many Chinese visitors are specifically motivated by the personal prestige of the luxurious wellness experiences, and that is a highly significant concern among practitioners in the wellness industry to create prestigious brands for luxurious spas in Thailand.

Compared to other tourism segments, very few studies have focused on luxurious wellness experiences, it is critical to understand how the experience economy affects in the formation of brand prestige, and the consequences of brand prestige on the following three business outcomes: functional and emotional benefits, and customer loyalty. More specifically, this report examines direct and indirect the effects of the experience economy on customer loyalty mediated by brand prestige, and to test direct and indirect impacts of brand prestige via functional and emotional performances, and brand loyalty. The outcomes of this study are expected to help wellness managers foster effective and efficient marketing strategies that can result in luxury seeking customers’ being involved Thai wellness operators with a loyal relationship.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Experience Economy

In 20<sup>th</sup> decade, business across the world is increasingly focused on the concept of customer experience, while marketers and practitioners have broadened the basic perspective roughly, there is a scare in marketing research addressing on how the right environment and stimuli setting for the value creation should be created to support marketers what specific experience that a company will offer to their consumers, in which that experience will in turn define their business. Back date in 1988, in the framework of Pine & Gilmore, they contextualized the four realms of experience economy, where the staging experiences can develop a new source of value, resulting in individuals demand for unique and memorable experiences. As stated by Pine & Gilmore (1988), the four experiential realms are sorted by two dimensions; the degree of customer participation and consumer involvement with the surroundings where they enjoy their experiences (Hosany & Witham, 2010). The subsequent section involves the four dimensions of tourists' experience and discuss how they are relevant to luxurious wellness tourism.

**2.1.1 Education:** this experience is stated when people are more actively engaged any events so as to learn something new; educational kind is absorptive and appeals the desire of consumers; on the other hand, consumers are an integral part in codetermining their experience. Typically, consumers will have skill improved or knowledge increased after participating an educational event. In tourism perspective, self-education in learning a new thing becomes a motivating factor to travel (Prentice, 2004). In the tourism activities, many companies provide numerous opportunities for an educational experience to their consumers such as snorkelling, scuba diving or ski-schools.

**2.1.2 Entertainment:** this kind of experience is probably one of the essential forms of tourism products (Hughes & Benn 1995), it is described when individuals are more likely to participate passively than actively. As studied by Pine & Gilmore (1999), tourists are being entertained by travel companies in a stage to delight and entertain patrons associated with a destination attached to entertainment. For example, Las Vegas is often overlooked as an entertainment capital in the US; in the other words. It remains as a core of gambling destination, but its appeal was broadened to include family-oriented entertainments such as live spectacular shows, room decors with theme park, virtual reality experiences, and so on.

**2.1.3 Esthetics:** this dimension is known as consumers' explanation of the physical environment where they are involved in. While the physical environment was termed by Bitner (1992), it can be categorized in terms of three forms; ambient conditions; spatial layout and functionality; and signs, symbols, and artifacts. Bonn, Joseph-Mathews, Dai, Hayes, & Cave, (2007) mentioned the role of esthetics of heritage attractions is important in decision making, and service evaluations, future patronage intentions and willingness to recommend. Consumers who are indulged in environments may have little or no

effect on it—like a traveler who are breathtaking in a scenery of Niagara Falls, or like a tourist who merely gets an ambience in a resort hotel (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011).

**2.1.4 Escapism:** Krippendorf (1987) gave a term of holidays as “escape aids, problem solvers, suppliers of strength, energy, new life blood and happiness”. Further notes from Cohen (1979), basic need of tourists’ motivation is to look for a “self-center” elsewhere away from the daily routine of life. Vacations provide a psychological escape from thought of everyday activities (Uriely, 2005). An escapist experience occurs when customers are active participants and have a greater immersion within the activity. Some common examples of escapist experiences include theme parks, adventure lands, simulated destinations, and themed attractions among others (Hosany & Witham, 2010).

Prior researches proposed a number of research frameworks of in different tourism contexts. For example, hunting (Komppula & Gartner, 2013), luxury cruise industry (Hwang & Han, 2014), rural tourism (Loureiro, 2014), golf (Hwang & Lyu, 2015), heritage museum (Radder & Han, 2015). Song, Lee, Park, Hwang & Reisinger (2015) explored the relationship of experiences in the temple stay and indicated that entertainment and escapist experiences play an important role in both functional and emotional value, whereas education influenced only functional value and esthetics affected only emotional value. While the study of Hwang & Han (2016) was empirically validated the application of the experience economy concept to luxury cruise passengers, they found that all four realms of experiences significantly influenced customer value and loyalty via mediator as brand prestige.

## **2.2 Brand Prestige**

Brand prestige is an expression of high or low status connected to product positioning, which depends upon the individuals’ status or esteem when competing the brand (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003). The appeal of a prestigious brand is inherent or unique, which concerns with a specific attribute or the overall quality and performance of a product or service (Dubois & Czellar, 2002), it is an important issue to be considered for a specific brand to be judged as prestigious (Baek, 2010). The concept of brand prestige is broader than luxury. That is, luxury is a subset of prestige which provides an exclusive possession of the upper classes from a prestige brand.

A Previous study by Vigneron & Johnson (1999), they proposed the notion of conspicuous consumption by a means of people who are willing to accept higher prices for prestigious brands, especially doing so, prestige brands can provide a signal to show a person’s class and wealth. Vigneron & Johnson (1999) divided prestige brands into three categories; (1) upmarket brands, (2) premium brands, and (3) luxury brands relating to brand prestige level. When compared with non-prestige brands, consumers believe that consumption of a prestigious brand is linked to their self-concept and social value. In other words, the purchase of prestigious brands is expressed as “the utility derived from the product’s ability to enhance social self-concept” (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Consumers are eager to select prestigious

brands because they would get psychological experience of social image to the upper classes (Steenkamp et al., 2003).

### 2.3 Experience and Brand Prestige

Steenkamp et al., (2003) explained that brand prestige is considered by consumers' subjective judgements, in which prestige-seeking customers are likely to perceive positive influences of experience from a prestigious brand. Several studies were empirically tested the influence of experience on brand prestige such as luxury restaurants (Hwang & Hyun, 2012), first-class flights (Ahn, Kim, & Hyun, 2015), luxury cruise (Hwang & Han, 2014). Based on the existing theoretical backgrounds, they found each dimension of experience attributes is a key factor affecting brand prestige. In particular, a recent study of Hwang & Han (2016), by enabling consumers to learn new things, the educational experiences positively affect cruise brand prestige among luxury cruise passengers, and thus enhancing the perceived luxury value of the cruise brand. Similarly, Suh & West (2010) showed of entertainment is a significant factor in attracting customers, it was found entertainment experience positively affected on brand prestige where people tend to enjoy performances or activities that entertain them from their dull lives. Moreover, people's emotional responses are being easily affected by the sensory attraction of events or performances, this demonstrates esthetic attributes affect the evaluation of brand prestige. Further, a sense of escapism from routine daily lives recover both physically and emotionally, people thus look for new things to improve the quality of life (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012. For this reason, the escapist experience plays an essential factor in influencing a luxury brand (Hwang & Han, 2016).

### 2.4 Benefit Concept and Brand Prestige

In the past decade, there was a lot of attention in assessing benefit concept in marketing, the terminology of benefit for a product of service is different, as it defines in various meanings. While Kotler, Bowen, & Makens (2003) gave a definition of benefit concept as a part of fulfillment of customer needs or wants. In another word, the benefits are entirely cognitive, and are often originated from the specific ability of the product or service that customers feel typically satisfied a desire amongst users after consuming a brand (Day & Crask, 2000); perhaps, benefits are stated in terms of multi-attributes reside in a product or service, they often represent more value than tangible benefits in nature, and are usually classified as functional and emotional benefits (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986). Later, the typology proposed by Christensen, Cook, and Hall (2006) concluded that functional and emotional benefits are integral part of customer satisfaction and the overall customer experience.

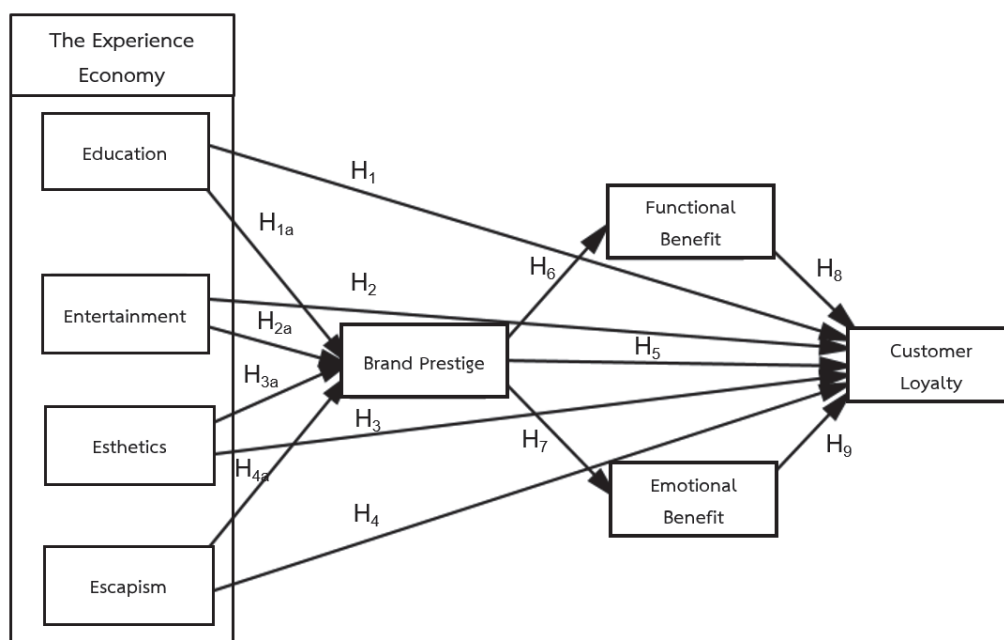
There is general concordance with Park et al.'s definition that functional benefits are aimed at satisfying of intrinsic needs through product or service attributes. These benefits are generally depicted as human needs, comprising physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1970).



Sheth, Newman, & Gross (1991) termed meaning of functional dimensions similarly—the utility of a product or service perceived by consumers that are derived from its functional, utilitarian, or physical purposes. Another point with general consensus is that the elimination or avoidance of problems (Fernell, 1978; Rossiter & Percy, 1987). The typology proposed by Newman and Gross (1991), emotional benefits relate to feelings or epistemic states of physiological arousal to which people perceived utility resulting from a product's performance. The emotional benefits are specially oriented to appeal human senses and evoke emotions, where senses and feeling correspond to a hedonic approach to enduring self-concept (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Brand prestige may arise from the perception of functional or emotional values of a specific attribute (Dubois & Czellar, 2002). Perceptions of brand prestige are related to both tangible product attributes (e.g. quality), as well as to more intangible qualities (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). In this research, the two benefits are considered to mediate the effects of brand prestige on customer loyalty.

## **2.5 Benefits and Customer Loyalty**

Many scholars recognized customer loyalty has a predominant influence in service marketing, due to its significant contribution to suppliers in creating long-term commitment with future customer purchases (Oliver, 1997). Broadly, the concept of customer loyalty typically involves a consumer's strong cooperative relationships in order to repurchase or patronize a product (Lee & Cunningham, 2001). Due in part to the nature of business markets, considering attitudinal loyalty has been highly involved in a degree of consumers' psychological attachment, which refers to a deep and enduring emotional bond connecting with the supplying firm (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Loyalty leads a high probability of creating enormous rewards for business, for example, high advocacy, positive word-of-mouth, low costs for customer acquisition, ultimately leading to greater profitability, and more stable relationships with the brand (Stern, 2014). An empirical finding from the customer loyalty (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008), they also conceptualized a loyal customer will actively repeat patronage, and will positively spread the brand to others. Existing researches in the consumer context have identified benefits as a predominant influence of customer loyalty, if customers meet for extraordinary experiences, a higher level of positive experiences from product or service will be perceived, and correspondingly, this will tend to heighten brand loyalty in a post-purchase (Hwang & Hyun, 2012). Empirical studies further verified that customer's perceived value helps brand to create customer loyalty, representing in forms of word-of-mouth, purchase intention, (Pura, 2005), as well as willingness to pay a price premium (Homburg, Koschate, & Hoyer 2005). Previous findings gave supports the idea that each product benefit is the primary motivation for enhancing brand loyalty such as Pura (2005) argued that monetary, emotional and social value are important factors in loyalty to the mobile services offered, therefore, all dimensions of benefits are connected to loyalty. In addition, a study of Kim, Kim, & Lee (2010), in luxury fashion brands, they confirmed four types of benefits (social, utilitarian, emotional, and financial benefits) are significant effects of brand loyalty. Based on the aforementioned, the following hypotheses are formally stated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Proposed Conceptual Model

Hypotheses in this study were shown as follows:

H<sub>1</sub> Education has a positively direct influence on customer loyalty

H<sub>2</sub> Entertainment has a positively direct influence on customer loyalty

H<sub>3</sub> Esthetics has a positively direct influence on customer loyalty

H<sub>4</sub> Escapism has a positive direct influence on customer loyalty

H<sub>1a</sub> Education has a positively indirect influence on customer loyalty via brand prestige

H<sub>2a</sub> Entertainment has a positively indirect influence on customer loyalty via brand prestige

H<sub>3a</sub> Esthetics has a positively indirect influence on customer loyalty via brand prestige

H<sub>4a</sub> Escapism has a positive indirect influence on customer loyalty via brand prestige

H<sub>5</sub> Brand prestige has a positive effect on customer loyalty

H<sub>6</sub> Brand prestige positively and indirectly affects customer loyalty through the mediating variable of functional benefit

H<sub>7</sub> Brand prestige positively and indirectly affects customer loyalty through the mediating variable of emotional benefit

H<sub>8</sub> Functional benefit has a positive effect on customer loyalty

H<sub>9</sub> Emotional benefit has a positive effect on customer loyalty



### 3. Research Methodology

A structured questionnaire was organized into five parts, including socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education level, monthly income, visiting group), multiple-items of four dimensions of Chinese tourists' experience; functional and emotional benefits; brand prestige; and customer loyalty. To collect data for this study, participants in this research were recruited voluntarily from Chinese visitors who had taken a wellness trip in Thailand's best 10 luxury spa resorts listed by tripadvisor.com (2018), in which a series of wellness commodities and services are provided quite similarly activities, e.g. high-end spas, fitness centers, and wellness classes, meditation, wellness programming, and sleep aides; healthier food options. Marketing database of luxury Chinese visitors was taken from the customer service teams among 10 listed luxury spa resorts. By doing this, an online survey company was employed to create a survey on WeChat platform as it was a part of the Tourism Authority of Thailand's project. In the process, an email invitation was submitted to the 343 Chinese travelers in order to respond the survey. In the very beginning of the survey, the respondents were asked to declare whether they had taken a luxury wellness trip within the past one year. Among them, 39 outliers and 104 missing data in any item to complete the online questionnaire were detected. Consequently, 143 questionnaires were then deleted out from the study, 200 usable responses remained for further analysis, giving about 58% of response rate.

Gathering data were conducted during March to May, 2018. Five-point rating scales were adopted to measure multi-items, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. In the final version of the questionnaire, a back translation was conducted to compare all multiple-item scales, as well as to confirm the quality and accuracy of measures. The measurement variables in this study were adopted from Hosany & Witham (2010) and Hwang & Han (2016). Three experts in the academic fields were asked to refine the questionnaire. To obtain high-quality of research outcomes, a preliminary test of 30 respondents was done to modify and restructure the question appropriateness. In the ultimate sample, 200 questionnaires were usable, giving an overall 58% response rate. As shown in Table 1, it displays the standardized factor loadings of each specific variable construct, all of the constructs were above .741, the composite reliability for eight latent constructs were greater than .70 threshold value (ranging from 0.875 to 0.938), that confirmed the internal consistency (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The values of the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeded .50, revealing that the convergent validity of the scales in the proposed model was acceptable (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

**Table 1:** Standardized Loadings, Validity and Reliability for Constructs

Measurement Items	Standardized Loading
<b>Education (CR = 0.921, AVE = 0.746)</b>	
1. I learned a lot to efficiently make perfect balance and personal well-being during this trip	.867
2. The experience made me more knowledgeable in detox and healthy nutrition plans	.907
3. The trip stimulated my curiosity to practice yoga retreats or meditation	.849
4. I learned a real wellness experience	.829
<b>Entertainment (CR = 0.875, AVE = 0.637)</b>	
1. Wellness activities provided at the resort kept me amused	.746
2. Wellness activities provided at the resort A were really captivating	.741
3. Wellness activities provided were entertaining	.817
4. Wellness activities provided were fun	.880
<b>Esthetics (CR = 0.923, AVE = 0.750)</b>	
1. The wellness resort was an attractive setting for my vacation	.874
2. The physical environment of the resort showed close attention to design details	.896
3. It was pleasant just being in the wellness resort	.841
4. I felt a real sense of harmony during my wellness trip	.852
<b>Escapism (CR = 0.915, AVE = 0.730)</b>	
1. I felt like I was living the role of someone different from myself in my daily life while I was in the wellness resort	.827
2. The wellness experience let me imagine being someone else	.790
3. I completely escaped from my daily routine during the wellness retreats	.899
4. I felt like I was in a different time or place during my stay in the wellness resort	.897
<b>Functional Benefit (CR = 0.926, AVE = 0.715)</b>	
1. Facilities provided in the wellness resort seemed like they were brand new and high quality	.860
2. Overall, the layout of the wellness resort with high-design decor made me feel cozy and relaxed	.791
3. Relaxing garden and grounds were fantastic	.868
4. Lighting and sound therapy made me heal my anxiety	.854
5. The wellness resort delivered services of the highest quality	.854

**Table 1:** Standardized Loadings, Validity and Reliability for Constructs (Cont.)

Measurement Items	Standardized Loading
<b>Emotional Benefit (CR = 0.940, AVE = 0.797)</b>	
1. This wellness trip was truly a joy	.917
2. I was happy during my stay at this wellness resort because of its health retreat program	.913
3. I had a good time because I was able to act on the 'spur of the moment'	.891
4. The time spent at this wellness trip was truly enjoyable	.849

**Notes:** Composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE)

Path analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships among key variables, and the maximum likelihood algorithm was applied to test parameters. Later, Cronbach's alpha was applied to measure an internal consistency reliability, which ranged between 0.847 to 0.875, resulting in the satisfactory range of the minimum threshold value of 0.6 (Nunnally, 1978). Likewise, Aron and Aron (1999) recommended that in a psychological research, the Cronbach's alpha values exceeding .7 are preferable of .60 or even lower could be satisfactory; however, values exceeding .7 are preferable. Thus, all of the 32 scale items used in this study are confirmed to be reliable and valid. Following the guidelines presented by Grewal, Cote, & Baumgartner (2004), pairwise correlations between each independent variable were tested (see Table 2). The possibility of multi-collinearity was detected. Based on this analysis, it was summarized that independent variables in the model are not highly correlated, multicollinearity was not likely be a problem.

**Table 2:** Correlation Matrix Between Variables in the Study (n = 200)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Education	<b>(.854)</b>							
2. Entertainment	.483**	<b>(.847)</b>						
3. Esthetics	.579**	.602**	<b>(.869)</b>					
4. Escapism	.560**	.362**	.487**	<b>(.875)</b>				
5. Functional benefit	.383**	.469**	.481**	.248**	<b>(.867)</b>			
6. Emotional benefit	.565**	.493**	.643**	.421**	.479**	<b>(.857)</b>		
7. Brand Prestige	.547**	.496**	.642**	.349**	.446**	.575**	<b>(.867)</b>	
8. Customer loyalty	.416**	.331**	.494**	.198**	.507**	.477**	.557**	<b>(.859)</b>
<b>Mean</b>	3.88	3.792	3.9687	3.653	4.11	4.211	3.943	4.3663
<b>SD</b>	.463	.4261	.43980	.5535	.450	.2893	.3705	.44190

**Note:** Cronbach's alpha value was presented in the brackets

## 4. Research Finding

Table 3 illustrates the demographic profiles of the respondents. In total, the participants were almost equally split between female (55.5%) and male (54.5%). Most of them were married, accounting for 66% of respondents, it was observed that people in married status preferred a personalized travel more than single people. In terms of age, 39% of participants were 36 to 50 years old, while 25% were in the age range of 26 to 35 years old, the higher proportion of travelers within the age range of 36 to 50 years old, it was worthy that there is a higher interest preference to personalize a customized travel program for both individuals and groups of tourists. Regarding monthly income, the majority of respondents had relatively high-income levels, they were in the 40,001 RMB to 50,000 RMB bracket (47%), while 27.5% of them were in the 30,001 RMB to 40,000 RMB bracket, followed by 4,000 RMB to 10,000 RMB (21%). Among the 200 usable responses, more than 50% obtained a bachelor degree. In summary, it can be said the fact that overall Chinese tourists in this sample size are well-educated, upper class, and hold economic power. Notably, wellness is considered to be a part of the lifestyle of wealthy people with high levels of education (Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2013).

The majority of Chinese visitors were repeaters, with past wellness trips taken ranging from one to two times (62.50%), followed by three to four times (26.50%), they were often accompanied by either their partner (57%) or their family (28.5%).

**Table 3:** Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Particular	n = 200	(%)
Gender	Female	91	55.5
	Male	109	54.5
Status	Single	68	34
	Married	132	66
Age (Years)	18 to 25	35	17.5
	26 to 35	50	25
	36 to 50	78	39
	Above 50	37	18.5
Monthly Income	< 20,000 RMB	8	4
	20,000 RMB to 30,000 RMB	23	11.5
	30,001 RMB to 40,000 RMB	55	27.5
	40,001 RMB to 50,000 RMB	94	47
	> 50,000 RMB	20	10

**Table 3:** Demographic Profile of Respondents (Cont.)

Variable	Particular	n = 200	(%)
Education Level	Lower than high school	16	8
	High school	46	23
	Bachelor's degree	114	57
	Master's degree or higher	24	12
Number of past wellness program taken	1–2	125	62.50
	3–4	53	12
	More than 4 times	22	26.50
Travel companion	Alone	9	22
	Partner	114	4.50
	Family	57	28.50
	Friends	20	10

#### 4.1 Path Analysis Estimates of the Study Model

The path analysis estimates from the causal model were graphically exhibited in Figure 2. Additionally, the standardized regression weights for the causal paths and  $R^2$  were identified. In the figure 2, significant path coefficients were represented by bold lines, and non-significant path estimates were shown by dotted arrows. Model fits of hypothesized path model were presented in Table 4. The proposed variables in this theoretical framework were tested by the maximum likelihood estimator. Based on the recommendation of Hu & Bentler (1999), various fit indices were applied to consider the model results as follows:  $\chi^2(272) = 872.982$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.209$ ,  $TLI = .959$ ,  $CFI = 0.966$ ,  $GFI = 0.977$ ,  $AGFI = .871$ ,  $SRMR = 0.045$ .  $RMSEA = 0.057$ . Model fit statistics for the proposed model was reasonably good fits of the proposed model.

Table 4: Summary of the Fit Indices for the Hypothesized Model

Fit index	Recommended criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999)	Values for the hypothesized model	Fit judgement
$\chi^2$	$\chi^2 = 872.982$ (d.f. = 272, $p = 0.000$ )		
CMIN/DF	3 or higher	3.209	Good fit
TLI	0.95 or higher	.959	Good fit
CFI	0.95 or higher	.966	Good fit
GFI	0.95 or higher	.977	Good fit
AGFI	0.8 or higher	.871	Good fit
SRMR	0.09 or lower	.045	Good fit
RMSEA	0.06 or lower	.057	Good fit

**Note:** Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ); df (Degrees of Freedom); Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI); Comparative Fit Index (CFI); Goodness of Fit Index (GFI); Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI); Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR); Root Mean Square Error (RMSEA).

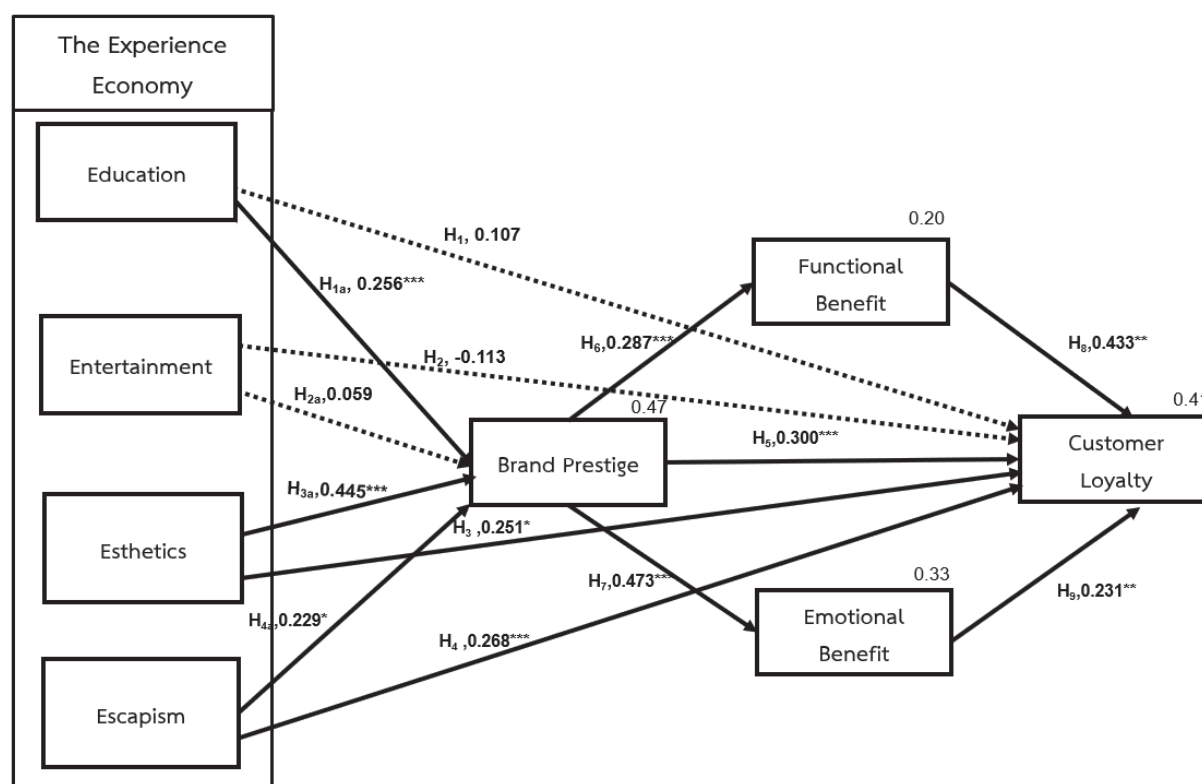


Figure 2: Standardized coefficients from the model results

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 5:** Results from testing the Hypotheses Using Parameter Estimates

	Path Estimate	t	p	Result
H <sub>1</sub> : Education → loyalty	0.107	1.486	0.136	Not supported
H <sub>2</sub> : Entertainment → loyalty	-0.113	-1.569	0.116	Not supported
H <sub>3</sub> : Esthetics → loyalty	0.251	3.024	0.043	Supported
H <sub>4</sub> : Escapism → loyalty	0.268	5.057	0.000	Supported
H <sub>1a</sub> : Education → Brand prestige → Loyalty	0.256	3.773	0.000	Supported
H <sub>2a</sub> : Entertainment → Brand prestige → Loyalty	0.059	1.135	0.358	Not supported
H <sub>3a</sub> : Esthetics → Brand prestige → Loyalty	0.455	6.13	0.000	Supported
H <sub>4a</sub> : Escapism → Brand prestige → Loyalty	0.229	3.271	0.035	Supported
H <sub>5</sub> : Brand Prestige → Loyalty	0.300	3.514	0.000	Supported
H <sub>6</sub> : Brand Prestige → Functional value	0.287	7.038	0.000	Supported
H <sub>7</sub> : Brand prestige → Emotional value	0.473	9.907	0.000	Supported
H <sub>8</sub> : Brand prestige → Functional value → Loyalty	0.433	4.734	0.000	Supported
H <sub>9</sub> : Brand prestige → Emotional value → Loyalty	0.231	2.962	0.008	Supported

As shown in Table 5, In-depth analysis shows only two dimensions (esthetics and escapism) of customer experience out of four realms were proved to have directly and indirectly significant influences on customer loyalty ( $\beta = 0.251$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) (H<sub>3</sub>), and  $\beta = 0.268$ ,  $p > 0.01$  (H<sub>4</sub>),  $\beta = 0.455$ ,  $p > 0.001$  (H<sub>3a</sub>),  $\beta = 0.229$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) (H<sub>4a</sub>), accordingly. In addition, the finding also revealed that educational experience has an indirect antecedent of customer loyalty via brand prestige ( $\beta = 0.256$ ,  $p > 0.001$ ) (H<sub>1a</sub>). However, entertainment showed no significance of direct and indirect paths on customer loyalty. As expected, there was a direct, positive relationship between brand prestige and customer loyalty ( $\beta = 0.300$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (H<sub>5</sub>), it also presents that brand prestige was positively and indirectly correlated on customer loyalty through functional benefit ( $\beta = 0.287$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (H<sub>6</sub>), and emotional value ( $\beta = 0.473$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (H<sub>7</sub>). Furthermore, both functional and emotional dimensions had direct positive effects on customer loyalty ( $\beta = 0.433$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (H<sub>8</sub>) and  $\beta = 0.231$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (H<sub>9</sub>).  $R^2$  values are used to represent the proportion of explaining the variance of the variables used in this study. As can be seen a substantial amount of variance of these variables indicated by the hypothesized model in Figure 2,  $R^2$  values indicated that the model explained 47% of the variance in brand awareness, 20% of the variance in functional benefit, 33% of the variance in emotional benefit, and 41% of the variance in customer loyalty.



Table 6 shows the significance direct, indirect, and total effects between the exogenous and mediating variables and the endogenous variables. The significance of indirect paths from mediating effects was calculated using Sobel's (1982) test. Based on the aforementioned, the summary results revealed esthetics and escapism have both direct and indirect links to customer loyalty via brand prestige. In the meantime, education has only indirect connections to loyalty through brand prestige. Lastly, a significant relationship between brand prestige and loyalty was confirmed with both direct and indirect effects via functional and emotional benefits. Adding the direct and indirect connections together, brand prestige accounts for the greatest total effect (0.3373) due mainly to its strong direct (0.30) and indirect effects mediated by functional benefit (0.0373), followed closely by total effect from full mediation of emotional benefit of the relationship between brand prestige and loyalty (0.3328), escapism (0.2864), and esthetics (0.2853), respectively.

**Table 6:** Direct Effects, Indirect Effects and Total Effects of Chinese Customer Loyalty

Direct Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Path via Mediator	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Education → loyalty	–	Education → Brand Prestige → loyalty	0.0768	0.0768
Esthetics → loyalty	0.251	Esthetics → Brand Prestige → loyalty	0.0343	0.2853
Escapism → loyalty	0.268	Escapism → Brand Prestige → Customer loyalty	0.0184	0.2864
Brand Prestige → Loyalty	0.300	Brand Prestige → Functional Benefit → Customer loyalty	0.0373	0.3373
		Brand Prestige → Emotional Benefit → Customer loyalty	0.0328	0.3328

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper attempts to verify the effects of the four dimensions of tourist experiences and brand prestige on consumer loyalty in the luxury wellness industry. An integrated model of four managerial outcome of brand prestige was constructed with the inclusive of two variables, functional and emotional benefits, and customer loyalty, a hypothesized model was performed to test direct and indirect relationships among the variables using path data collected from 200 Chinese tourists of Thailand's luxurious wellness spas. For the hypotheses testing, the conceptual model was confirmed to be applicable. The p-value was greater than 0.05 and the path analysis yielded sufficient fit indices within the acceptable range (Schreiber, Nora, Stage, Barlow, & King, 2006),  $\chi^2/df = 1.6$ , GFI = 0.90, AGFI = 0.86, IFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.045 and SRMR = 0.049). Nine hypotheses out of twelve were supported, while 3 were rejected. Overall, the results provided evidence that the significantly positive antecedents of esthetics and escapism experiences on customer loyalty mediated by brand prestige,

while brand prestige is a positively, directly and indirectly effect on customer loyalty through the mediating variables as functional and emotional benefits. The study implications from the hypotheses testing were offered various insights for luxury wellness managers and operators in the following sections.

## **5.1 Theoretical Implications**

The noticeable findings from this research demonstrate a theoretically novel study of luxury wellness industry in Thailand by adding new discoveries. The significant findings were discussed to understand the multiple dimensions of experience and associated with brand prestige, functional and emotional values, and loyalty when tested in the context of the luxurious wellness industry. However, the importance of each experience differed in its impact. Overall, the results of the study were shown positively direct impacts of escapist experience on loyalty, where they are the strongest relation in forming the customer loyalty. Such a finding of direct significance can be explained that Chinese tourists have a positive experience from luxurious wellness services, where they hope to enjoy a life of privilege and escape from their daily routine, this has been regarded as a vital factor affecting customer loyalty. Like a previous study, this finding of the importance of escapism is consistent with Hayes & MacLeod, (2007) and Quadri-Felitti & Fiore (2012), indicating that tourists expected to get the feeling of escape from routine daily lives (Allison, Severt & Dickson, 2010).

Furthermore, esthetics is also found to be a significant effect on customer loyalty. The findings of the study indicate that customers hope to get high class environments where they feel indulged from the present real life to compensate a lot of money spent, which in turn positively affects loyalty. Thus, the result regarding esthetics is in line with the Hyun (2010), he revealed a significant relationship of esthetics and loyalty in the chain restaurant industry, as well as Hwang & Hyun (2015), they identified escapist experience is a strong predictor in affecting the perceived luxury value in the luxury cruise industry. In addition, among the four realms of experiences (educational, escapist and escapist experiences) had significant indirect effects on loyalty through brand prestige. Positive impacts of three sub-dimensions of experiences can be illustrated that if tourists have an opportunity to learn a new thing (detox program, yoga, health retreat, and organic farming), to view splendor places which affect their emotional responses such as granite cliffs, waterfalls, layout, and facilities) and to feel escapism both physically and emotionally from normal life during the service, such findings imply that they tend to feel prestige of the wellness services (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). However, the study showed entertainment did not directly or indirectly influence loyalty, one possible explanation is that many wellness service providers do not provide something fun that makes customers feel entertained during the services as the degree expected.

More importantly, regarding the significance of brand prestige, it is worth to note that the findings revealed positively direct and indirect effects of its outcome on customer loyalty mediated by both functional and emotional benefits, which corroborates an existing literature (Hwang & Han, 2016), meaning that such Chinese tourists pay a price premium for purchasing luxurious wellness programs because

prestigious brands form their upscale consumption lifestyle and status (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999). Last, both functional and emotional benefits did directly influence loyalty, which can be explained that they were found to be important roles of the luxury wellness segment. Furthermore, the result is in accordance with Yang & Mattila (2016) provided empirical evidence to show that functional, hedonic, and financial luxury values led significant relationships with purchase intention in upscale grocerants.

## 5.2 Managerial Implications

The following practical implications of the research findings were proposed the effectiveness of luxurious wellness brand strategies by adding insights from the important viewpoints for Thailand's wellness tourism sector.

First, the finding shows that Chinese tourists are now looking towards high-end travel, as prestige wellness and spa, especially Thailand is a place for wellness and wellbeing retreats, it found that they actively expected to get more knowledgeable when experiencing a luxury holiday. In this regard, Veera & Terhi-Anna (2018) said people are now increasingly paying attention for health and rejuvenation purposes, wellness service providers are required to focus on educational experiences when designing wellness packages. For example, it is recommended to include knowledge of the perfect balance of efficiency and personal well-being, yoga classes, meditation sessions, detox and healthy nutrition plans, these findings are consistent with a previous research of Lee, Lee, & Cheng (2019), some seminars about health education and wellness can help wellness seekers to lead them to a healthier lifestyle.

Second, as people are easily affected by the physical environment, thus, to let Chinese tourists feel escapist experiences at luxury wellness activities, it is necessary to pay more attention in developing a comfortable and cozy environment for wellness services. For instance, elegant high-class decoration, comfortable and warm lighting, relaxing garden oasis, brand-new facility, sound therapies. As supported by Ryu & Jang, (2007), they emphasized a prestigious image can be created by subdued, relaxed, and warm lighting.

Third, the study found that escapism plays an important role in making the loyalty of Chinese tourists via wellness service prestige, so luxury wellness operators need to focus more on tourists' sense of escapism related to brand prestige. Moreover, a variety of activities to escape from WI-FI and other digital distractions should be provided for psychological drop out practices such as transcendental meditation, sound therapies, spiritual spas, exotic organic food, which allure customers and provide escapism experiences, As mentioned previously, natural remedies and mind therapy are valued as important hotel amenities (Lee, Lee, & Cheng, 2019).

Consequently, if a luxury wellness operator provides such wellness programs for Chinese tourists to get a temporary break from the chaos of routine lives, they tend to perceive high levels of escapism (Hwang & Han, 2016). Additionally, functional and emotional benefits are significant predictors of a

prestigious wellness brand leading to loyalty, it is suggested that managers put efforts into enhancing these benefits as customers feel prestigious formed by their experiences. Service quality on customer satisfaction are more important to be concerned to prepare a variety of wellness programs. Finally, emotional benefits are formed by many activities, such as, ability to learn oneself, relaxation, stress reduction, and so forth. Because customers expect superior service that reflects customer needs.

### **5.3 Limitation and Future Research**

Notably, Chinese tourists' wellness consumption has become a mainstream revenue of Thailand. However, this study was limited to the 10 selected luxury spa resorts by [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com), a further research should be explored about wellness respondents' attitudes, desires, and behaviors so as to see a whole picture of wellness consumers in different types of wellness service, and other wellness-related consumption environments in order to advance knowledge in the wellness industry.

Furthermore, in the future study, the conceptual model needs to acquire different populations in different fields for ensuring external validity. The entire variables conducted in this research were derived in the same time causing common method bias. As Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff (2003) earlier mentioned, future research might consider collecting data in different period so as to minimize this limitation in behavioral research data. Also, next study could expand on a larger group of more diversified wellness consumers from different countries or backgrounds by investigating, possibly through comparative means.

Lastly, an online survey of a wellness operator system was used to collect data from Chinese tourists who had ever taken a luxury wellness program within the previous three months. Even an advantage of online survey is a great method to save both time and money, but it may result in selection biases, thus diverse data collection techniques are recommended for further study.

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