

Article

Balancing Growth and Tradition: The Potential of Community-Based Wellness Tourism in Ubud, Bali

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Abstract

This study examines community-based wellness tourism (CBWT) in Ubud, Bali, focusing on ownership structures, community participation, and the role of local traditions. Using a qualitative design, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews with wellness stakeholders and field observations of spas and yoga centers. The findings reveal that spas are predominantly locally owned and staffed, ensuring value retention and skill development, while flagship yoga and retreat centers are dominated by non-local actors, creating risks of economic leakage and weaker cultural stewardship. Community involvement is strong in operations but limited in planning and governance, highlighting a policy–practice gap. Integrating Balinese traditions, such as Usada Bali and Melukat, could enhance authenticity but requires careful protection against commodification. The findings reveal that locally owned spas contribute to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through local value retention, employment creation, and skill development, while non-local dominance of yoga and retreat centers risks economic leakage and weakened cultural guardianship. The study also identifies gaps in governance and planning, underscoring the need for inclusive participation and capacity building to align with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Integrating Balinese traditions, such as Usada Bali and Melukat, highlights the opportunities for safeguarding cultural heritage, provided that protocols against commodification are enforced. To address these challenges, the study proposes a strategic framework emphasizing governance reform through a quadruple-helix model, shared-equity ownership, standardized human capital development, and protocol-based cultural guardianship. Despite the limitations of this being a single-case, cross-sectional study, the findings contribute to wellness tourism research by shifting attention from visitor demands to governance and equity. The study offers practical strategies for institutionalizing CBWT in Ubud while providing a transferable model for destinations seeking to balance growth with tradition.

Keywords: wellness tourism; community based; stakeholders; cultural preservation; sustainable development goals



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1. Introduction

Wellness tourism has evolved into a substantial sector of the travel industry, aiming to enhance physical, mental, and social well-being through travel experiences. It is defined

as travel specifically designed to enhance wellness, encompassing wellness resorts, yoga retreats, and leisure treatments that integrate holistic care and relaxation into the travel experience (Gan et al., 2023; Zrnić et al., 2021). In 2022, the global wellness tourism market experienced a growth of USD 821.75 billion, with a projected annual growth rate of 12.42% from 2023 to 2030 (Global Wellness Institute, 2024; Grand View Research, 2023; Market, 2023). Modern pressures, including pollution and sedentary lifestyles, are prompting consumers to recognize the benefits of lifestyle adjustments and holistic health practices (Lim et al., 2016).

Initially, wellness tourism was associated with historical practices through which civilizations prioritized rehabilitation through natural and traditional remedies. The foundation for today's wellness resorts was established by the ancient Greek and Roman cultures, which constructed spa cities around natural mineral springs. Spa culture originated in regions with therapeutic natural resources and transitioned into wellness tourism during the 19th century (Dini & Pencarelli, 2021; Zrnić et al., 2021). During this period, the notion of the therapeutic properties of nature experienced a surge in prominence, largely due to movements such as Romanticism, which underscored the healing properties of the natural environment.

Wellness tourism began to grow rapidly in the late twentieth century, largely due to a growing societal movement focused on health and wellness. This shift was marked by a greater global focus on lifestyle diseases linked to stress and environmental variables, increasing travel for health-related experiences (Zhong et al., 2023).

The term "wellness tourism" is different from "health tourism". "Health tourism" is a broad category that includes various tourism activities designed to improve people's health. It comprises medical tourism, which is defined as traveling to receive medical treatments or services, while "wellness tourism" focuses on the holistic components of health, including physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. Viewing health and well-being on a continuum might help to discern between them. On the one hand, poor health, injury, or illness can be treated medically, such as with surgery or dental care, influenced usually by cost, quality, or accessibility reasons. On the other hand, wellness emphasizes proactive actions to maintain health, reduce stress, and improve well-being. Wellness travel includes activities such as spa retreats, yoga, and fitness programs (Global Wellness Institute, 2024; Kemppainen et al., 2021). According to Zhong et al., there are three major categories of health tourism: wellness tourism, health and wellness tourism, and medical tourism, each with its own set of aims and target audiences (Zhong et al., 2023).

According to their reason for traveling, the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) divides wellness tourists into primary and secondary wellness travelers. Seeking wellness-related services is the primary reason for travel for the first segment, and they choose their destination based on the services provided there. One example of a main wellness traveler is a tourist who travels to a spa resort that is situated in a natural setting solely for well-being-related reasons. Conversely, secondary wellness travelers are those who, wherever they go, always look for opportunities to maintain their well-being (Global Wellness Institute, 2018).

Recent developments involving communities as stakeholders are a viable solution for sustainable development by better ensuring the sustainability of a destination's environmental, economic, and socio-cultural factors. Various community-based tourism (CBT) projects have been carried out in the last three decades around the world. The definition of community-based tourism also varies across countries and regions based on their policies, implementation, and practices (Bagus & Utama, 2011; Juliana et al., 2023b; Pham Hong et al., 2021; Zapata-Sierra, 2022). Although each community is differentiated according to its unique characteristics, the literature on community-based tourism treats each community as a homogeneous entity.

A study on the life cycle expectations of CBT projects revealed that CBT with a bottom-up approach initiated by local communities grows faster, develops longer, and has greater positive impacts on local communities than top-down community-based tourism designed and funded by external organizations (Eslami et al., 2019). If properly developed, CBT has the potential to become a poverty reduction tool as well as a means of gaining access to a higher quality of life, empowering individuals in local communities, and increasing their economic benefits (Dodds et al., 2018).

As a tourism industry that has traditionally been controlled by outside forces, the island of Bali has worked to increase local citizen involvement. Community-based tourism has thus become an increasingly popular tourism development strategy, with promises of more inclusive prospects for community empowerment (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). The variety of wellness tourism facilities and activities in the Ubud District does not rule out the possibility of developing new facilities and activities that could provide more opportunities for the community to participate in the planning, work, and as business owners, with better collaboration among all stakeholders.

Research Gaps: Although wellness tourism research is growing, three specific gaps remain underexplored:

- (1) **Ownership, value capture, and leakage (political–economy gap):**
Wellness research often foregrounds visitor motivations and experiences, but offers limited empirical mapping of ownership structures (local vs. non-local; household vs. corporate) and the downstream implications for value retention, decent work, and local supply chain linkages. Without this, debates on “community-based” wellness remain normative rather than evidence based.
- (2) **Quality (not just presence) of participation (governance gap):**
Policy rhetoric frequently mandates community participation, yet few studies have operationalized and measured its quality across the planning–development–management cycle (e.g., decision rights, capacity, benefit sharing, monitoring roles). The literature lacks a transparent rubric with which to diagnose the policy–practice gap in wellness settings.
- (3) **Cultural sustainability and indigenous knowledge (place-making gap):**
While “authenticity” is central to wellness branding, there is little systematic analysis of how indigenous healing practices and ritual life are incorporated, safeguarded, or commodified, and what the social and cultural consequences are for the host communities.

The purpose of this study is to address a key gap in wellness tourism research by shifting attention from the demand-side outcomes to governance and community participation. Focusing on Ubud as a high-density, culturally rooted wellness hub, we examine forms of participation across planning, development, and management; analyze ownership and state–industry–academia–community collaboration; and identify the policy–practice gaps that hinder equitable, sustainable outcomes. The goal is to generate actionable, locally grounded strategies for institutionalizing community-based wellness tourism. Building on the above, the study pursues two purposes: (1) to evaluate the implementation of community-based wellness tourism in Ubud; (2) to propose effective development strategies that balance growth and tradition. These two purposes are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, namely Reducing Poverty (SDG-1) and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG-17). The study operationalizes these through the following questions:

- (1) RQ1: How do ownership structures and forms of community participation differ?
- (2) RQ2: Which local traditions and cultural assets most effectively enhance authenticity/uniqueness and competitiveness without commodifying or eroding cultural meaning?
- (3) RQ3: What governance and capacity-building mechanisms can close the policy–practice gap and institutionalize CBWT principles in Ubud?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Wellness

Wellness is a complex term that incorporates a comprehensive approach to health and quality of life, integrating physical, mental, and social well-being. It is defined by a continuous endeavor of self-improvement and self-care, prompting individuals to pursue optimal performance across multiple life domains. This holistic perspective on wellness is reflected in the definitions provided by reputable organizations like the World Health Organization, which characterizes health as a “state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being”, rather than simply the absence of illness (Bates et al., 2019; Schramme, 2023).

The concept of wellness has undergone substantial evolution throughout the years, notably due to shifts in societal norms and advancements in health science. Ullah et al. observed that the focus on wellness has intensified, particularly in the health tourism industry, where travelers pursue experiences that address ailments while also fostering overall wellness, through practices such as yoga, meditation, and balanced nutrition (Ullah et al., 2021). This industry has demonstrated an increasing recognition of the advantages of promoting well-being instead of solely focusing on conventional medical interventions for health conditions.

Furthermore, wellness is increasingly being recognized as a dynamic process, highlighting the need for active engagement and individual accountability in health management. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines well-being as the existence of pleasant feelings, life satisfaction, and fulfillment, emphasizing that wellness includes both emotional and psychological aspects (Bautista et al., 2023).

2.2. Wellness Tourism

Wellness tourism is a sector of the travel business focused on visiting locations specifically to enhance health and well-being. This may encompass activities including spa treatments, yoga retreats, meditation, nutrition, and fitness programs. Previous research has asserted that wellness tourism encompasses activities that promote not just physical health but also emotional, social, and psychological well-being (Kim et al., 2015). Moreover, wellness tourism has risen in importance owing to the growing consumer interest in health-focused travel experiences (Lopes & Rodríguez-López, 2022).

Studies have revealed several motivations for participating in wellness tourism, including the pursuit of respite from daily tensions and the quest for holistic health enhancements. Gan et al. emphasized that visitors are increasingly driven by the perceived value of wellness activities, resulting in a burgeoning trend in this sector (Gan et al., 2023). As individuals gain awareness of health and wellness concerns, they are motivated to pursue travel experiences that enhance their overall well-being (Li & Huang, 2022).

The wellness tourism sector has experienced significant growth, further propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, which altered travelers' focus toward prioritizing health and preventive wellness strategies (Li & Huang, 2022). Market trends have indicated that wellness tourism is transforming due to personalization, with travelers pursuing customized experiences that correspond to their well-being objectives. This trend has been enabled by technological advancements and platforms that offer tailored vacation packages emphasizing personal preferences in wellness experiences (Hashim et al., 2019).

Wellness tourism encompasses various elements, including retreats centered on physical fitness, nutritional programs, and courses that provide instruction on stress management strategies, such as mindfulness and meditation. Previous research has emphasized that there has been an increase in demand for wellness services, resulting in the expansion of specialized wellness facilities and destinations (Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2014).

Backman et al. found that a restorative environment plays a crucial role in enhancing pleasant feelings, life satisfaction, loyalty, and the intention to return to a wellness facility (Backman et al., 2023). Furthermore, the wellness tourism sector has become more closely associated with environmental and cultural sustainability. Immersive experiences that integrate local culture and ecological preservation are frequently the focus of development strategies, including wellness offerings based on Ayurveda and local culinary experiences that are rooted in traditional practices (Sanjaya et al., 2024). By establishing these connections, wellness tourism destinations can attract a more diverse clientele seeking transformative experiences in engaging environments, thereby enhancing their authenticity and appeal (Feng et al., 2021; Juliana et al., 2024; Juliana et al., 2022b). The future of wellness tourism appears promising, as it is consistent with the broader trends of sustainable travel practices and healthful living. It is anticipated that the sector will continue to expand as travelers pursue more comprehensive experiences that foster emotional and social well-being in addition to physical health (Feng et al., 2021; Lopes & Rodríguez-López, 2022). In the years ahead, the evolution of wellness offerings will likely be influenced by efforts to adapt to evolving consumer expectations, such as using technology to provide personalized wellness experiences.

2.3. Community-Based Tourism

Community-based tourism (CBT) is a form of tourism that involves the local community as the primary actors in the planning, development, and administration of tourist activities. This engagement contributes to the well-being of the community by cultivating a sense of pride in its cultural heritage and creating economic opportunities (Ginanjari, 2023; Habiba & Lina, 2023).

Economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social benefits are among the numerous advantages of CBT. This was demonstrated by Aji and Faniza, who showed that community participation results in the development of skills through training and education, thereby enabling residents to participate effectively in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Aji & Faniza, 2024). Additionally, as Lemelin et al. reported, successful CBT initiatives not only provide tangible benefits, such as job creation and income, but also enhance intangible benefits, such as strengthened social connections and increased community pride (Lemelin et al., 2015). In community-based tourism, the local community possesses full authority and ownership of tourism enterprises, guaranteeing that the financial benefit of tourism remains within the local economy (Habiba & Lina, 2023).

CBT is in close alignment with the principles of sustainable development, as it guarantees the preservation of local cultures and ecosystems while simultaneously offering economic opportunities. The research suggests that the participation of the community in tourism planning can result in increased environmental awareness and concern among residents (T. H. Lee & Jan, 2019).

2.4. Community-Based Wellness Tourism

A key indicator of community-based wellness tourism (CBWT) is the extent of local community involvement in tourism planning, development, and management. Previous studies have emphasized the significance of local satisfaction regarding sustainable tourism development, observing that more community engagement generally results in more effective programs and improved outcomes for local communities (Akbar et al., 2021).

The economic advantages to the local community are a crucial indicator of the success of CBWT. This involves evaluating the extent to which local enterprises and inhabitants derive financial advantages from tourism activities, including augmented revenue from lodging, dining services, and wellness initiatives. A previous study demonstrated that

community-based efforts enhance local economies by fostering job development and improving livelihoods (Bozdaglar, 2023).

A crucial element of CBWT is the preservation of local culture and traditions. The indicators of success may encompass the level of integration of cultural practices into tourism experiences and the degree of empowerment felt by community members in sharing their history. Assessing the engagement in and attendance at local cultural events, festivals, and traditions can illuminate the impact of wellness tourism on a community's cultural landscape. However, the unforeseen consequences of community-based tourism operations have been shown in the changing of relationships among community members. Studies have identified that initially close relationships among villagers have transformed into loose relationships as a result of forgotten communal goals; CBT has evolved from a conservation tool to a business-oriented goal, causing conflicts of interest among locals and altering traditional social structures (Pookhao, 2014; Juliana et al., 2021, 2022a, 2023a). This study also agrees with the notion of social exchange theory as a way for villages to increase their environmental sustainability and posits that minor discrepancies in the benefits gained from CBT can create social transformation at the local level.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

Bali is one of Indonesia's most popular tourist destinations, with significant potential for growth due to its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and well-developed tourism infrastructure. According to [WellnessTourism.com \(2024\)](#), Bali is ranked second after Tuscany, Italy, on the Top Ten Wellness Destinations in the World. After Bali, there is Sedona (USA), Kyoto (Japan), Costa Rica, Iceland, Kerala (India), Provence (France), Queenstown (New Zealand), and Ubud, Bali (Indonesia). This indicates that the wellness industry in Bali has been recognized internationally. Wellness tourism in Bali has exhibited significant growth, particularly in the Ubud District, which is located in Gianyar Regency.

This study concentrates on the Ubud District, which has several tourist settlements with a high potential for wellness tourism development that provide a variety of treatments, yoga, and meditation amid stunning natural landscapes and a tranquil ambiance. Based on statistical data, 96 of the 410 spas on the island are located in Ubud. A total of 73 of the 96 spas are day spas, while 23 are hotel/resort spas. Yoga and Pilates facilities are dispersed throughout Ubud, in addition to spas, in both populated and less populated areas. Some of the spas and yoga facilities in Ubud are listed in Tables 1 and 2.

According to the previous research by Kiskenda et al., the owners (almost 90% of all spas) and the workforce in Ubud spas primarily come from the local population. The local workers from Bali totaled 94 people. The standards that must be met by the workforce are determined by the 42 spa owners and are arranged in order of priority. These standards include (1) the ability to massage, (2) a minimum of one year of experience, (3) motivation and loyalty, and (4) a high level of education (Kiskenda et al., 2024).

Some of the most renowned yoga and Pilates studios include The Yoga Barn and Radiantly Alive Yoga Studio. Some spas also serve as yoga and Pilates centers, such as the Ubud Body Work Centre, which offers massage and yoga therapy. Unlike spas, the ownership of these famous yoga studios is not held by local people, but by people from outside the region or from abroad.

Table 1. Spas in Ubud.

Spa Name	Activities	Uniqueness	Owned By
Ubud Traditional Spa	massage, reflexology	professional therapists	Arya Mahendra (local)
Hesa Wellness Spa	massage, Turkish hammam, Korean scrub	cold and hot pools	No data
Karsa Spa	massage and body treatment	healing massage (reiki) and organic oils	No data
Sang Spa	spa and yoga	rooted in Balinese tradition	I Putu Ngurah Sudarma (local)
Jaens Spa	massage and body treatment	rooted in Balinese tradition	I Putu Ngurah Sudarma (local)
Tejas Spa	facial treatments	Ayurveda healing treatment	Mayun Prabawa (local)
Svaha Spa Bisma	massage and body treatment	Balinese tradition and modern wellness	No data

Source: Data analysis, 2025.

Table 2. Yoga in Ubud.

Name of Yoga Center	Activities	Uniqueness	Owned By
Yoga Barn (est. 2007)	yoga, healing meditation, dance class	various classes, food tour	I Kadek Gun (local) and Charley Patton
Radiantly Alive Yoga Studio (est. 2012)	yoga	yin yoga, traditional Chinese medicine	Rafael Corrochano
Ubud Yoga House	yoga and meditation	sunrise yoga, sound meditation	Sheila Burch
Ubud Yoga Centre	yoga, café, shop	river view	Mony Suryani
Blooming Lotus Yoga	yoga	yoga retreat	Lily Goncalves
Alchemy Yoga	yoga and meditation	non-dual Shaiva and Shakta tantra	Ashton Szabo

Source: Data analysis, 2025.

3.2. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to investigate the operation of community-based wellness tourism (CBWT) in Ubud. [Creswell and Creswell \(2017\)](#) characterized a qualitative approach as a method that aids researchers in exploring, analyzing, and comprehending the meaning derived from social issues in both individual and group contexts through inductive data analysis.

Secondary Data: The purpose of collecting secondary data was to define the constructs, build the interview guide, and map the destination context. The data was collected from the scholarly literature (Scopus) on wellness tourism, CBT/CBWT, governance, and cultural sustainability, and from official statistics on Ubud's wellness supply (e.g., spa and yoga/Pilates facilities), and was used to establish Ubud's market concentration. The findings informed the interview guide (constructs, probes) and the sampling frame (which stakeholder types to target), and provided baseline counts of the wellness facilities in Ubud Bali.

Primary Data: The study organized semi-structured interviews with key informants spanning academia, industry/owners, and associations, such as (1) Dr. Irma Rahyuda,

(2) Ida Ayu Rusmarini, M.P., (3) Dr. Yoga Iswara, (4) Dr. Irene Hanna H. Sihombing, (5) Ketut Suabawa, and (6) Nyoman Hartini, as listed in Appendix A.

Non-participant field observations of wellness facilities (spas, yoga studios, meditation centers) were conducted to record the service formats, use of local traditions, and staffing patterns. The study used purposive expert sampling, selecting informants with decision or knowledge roles in Ubud's wellness ecosystem to ensure maximum variation across subsectors (spas vs. yoga) and roles (planning, development, and operations). Interviews were continued until redundancy was reached (no new codes emerging across successive interviews) to support sufficiency for a thematic analysis.

Instruments: An interview guide was developed from the secondary scoping and the CBWT framework (CBT principles, wellness elements, transformational values, and local uniqueness), with probes into the participation stages, ownership, benefit sharing, and use of Balinese traditions (e.g., Usada Bali, Melukat). The research also used an observation sheet, a short checklist of the facility type, ownership cues, staff provenance, and cultural/environmental safeguards.

3.3. Data Analysis

The research applied open coding to the interview transcripts and observation notes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Steps: (i) Familiarization (multiple readings); (ii) line-by-line open coding; (iii) codebook consolidation; (iv) axial clustering of related codes; (v) theme construction aligned to the CBWT framework (participation/benefit sharing/sustainability, wellness elements, transformational values, and local uniqueness). Throughout, we used constant comparison, iteratively testing whether new data modified the existing codes/themes, and analytic memos to record decisions.

This study triangulated the emerging themes with facility counts and distribution (e.g., spa/yoga concentration) to corroborate claims about Ubud's agglomeration. Prior empirical findings on local spa ownership and workforce standards were used to interpret value capture and capacity issues.

Figure 1 below shows the research stages from data collection to data analysis.

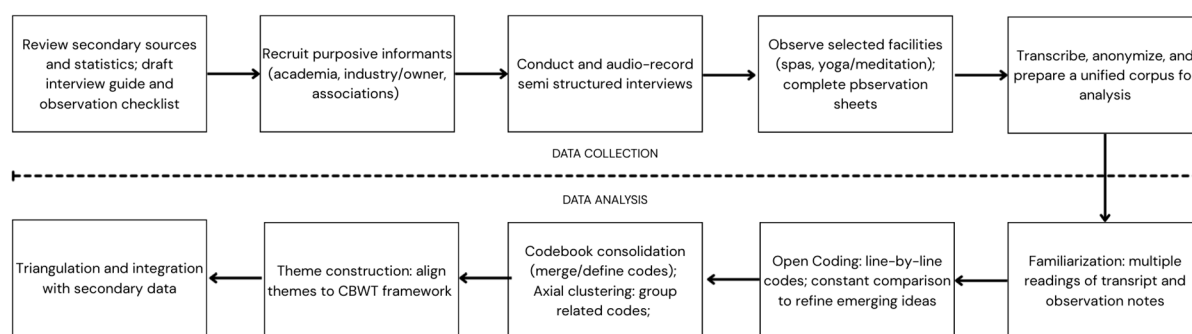


Figure 1. Research stages.

4. Results

4.1. Ownership Structures and Forms of Community Participation

The evidence shows local dominance in spas, with almost 90% of spa ownership, and a largely Balinese workforce (n number of local workers 94). By contrast, the prominent yoga/retreat studios (e.g., The Yoga Barn, Radiantly Alive) are non-locally owned, while some hybrids (e.g., Ubud Body Work Centre) combine spa and yoga offerings. Local or shared ownership concentrates the value capture locally, in jobs, supplier linkages, and reinvestment. The non-local dominance in yoga/retreat studios heightens the leakage risks, weakens cultural stewardship, and could misalign narratives with Balinese knowledge.

Meanwhile, community-based tourism (CBT) frames local control, ownership, and benefit retention as necessary conditions for equity and sustainability (Habiba & Lina, 2023), often coupled with substantive decision rights across planning, development, and management (T. H. Lee & Jan, 2019).

Based on the data, Ubud's local communities are currently reaping the benefits of wellness tourism activities, both as entrepreneurs (especially in spas) and as employees (in many wellness facilities), according to this perspective. As employees, they receive a higher salary as professionals and trained personnel (Akbar et al., 2021; Bozdaglar, 2023). It is expected that from their experience as workers and the capital they accumulate, one day they will be able to become business owners. This is in line with what was said by a representative from the Association of Women Entrepreneurs:

"Numerous entrepreneurs from outside Bali are currently establishing wellness businesses in Ubud and Bali as a whole. However, these entrepreneurs also generate substantial employment opportunities for the local population. We endeavor to provide training and counseling to enable local individuals who are presently employed to accumulate capital and establish their own businesses." (I1)

Forty-two spa owners prioritize four competence standards: (1) massage ability, (2) ≥ 1 year of experience, (3) motivation and loyalty, (4) higher education (Kiskenda et al., 2024). Prior studies have indicated that skill-based professional roles in wellness tourism can raise local incomes when standards and career ladders are in place, while fragmented skill systems create uneven quality, fragile visitor trust, and slower wage progression (Akbar et al., 2021; Bozdaglar, 2023). Empowerment initiatives must be implemented consistently by both qualified therapists and trainers. To enhance the quality of human resources, the government and academics must collaborate with all the stakeholders in wellness tourism (Ginanjari, 2023).

We can see that community participation is strong in operations but limited in planning/strategy. In reality, community involvement in tourism planning is still limited. This is due to the limited capacity of the community to engage in the planning process. This gap between policy and practice limits community steering of growth trajectories.

4.2. Local Authenticity and Uniqueness

Local traditions are an essential component of wellness tourism. The combination of exceptional service and local culture gives tourists an unparalleled and unforgettable experience. A luxurious experience is not solely attributed to the use of premium facilities, but also to the provision of services that have never been encountered before. The interviewees agreed that

"Wellness tourism must have uniqueness. Uniqueness is what distinguishes wellness tourism in one place from another. Spa in Bali will begin with a ritual of soaking and scrubbing the guest's feet with flower water by a therapist, and end with giving a traditional spice drink. This is not found anywhere else." (I2, I3)

Local wisdom is considered the distinguishing factor that sets them apart from others. Otherwise, wellness tourism is similar across several locations (Zrnić et al., 2021). To promote wellness through tourism, indigenous knowledge must be prioritized. The cuisine, herbs used, and massage services must be unparalleled, and traced back to the practices of local ancestors. They must be differentiated to attract visitors. Among the various spas in Ubud, most offer a traditional Balinese spa experience, based on Usada Bali, using traditional Balinese rituals, Bali organic oils, and therapies that are specifically from Bali (Bagus & Utama, 2011).

However, several wellness services incorporate traditions from beyond Bali, such as the Ayurvedic Spa, which is derived from the ancient therapeutic technique of Ayurveda in India. Ayurveda is a comprehensive therapeutic approach that emphasizes the equilibrium of the body, mind, and spirit. The Ayurveda Spa provides an array of therapies, including massage, herbal therapy, and additional modalities aimed at enhancing health and restoring bodily equilibrium. This is understandable, given the nearly identical Hindu cultural origins of India and Bali. Furthermore, Indian tourists currently constitute the main market in Bali. Two interviewees emphasized the importance of authenticity in Bali wellness:

“Bali, particularly Ubud, is currently experiencing a proliferation of spa developments. There is currently no definitive guidance regarding the operation of wellness tourism in Bali. What distinguishes them from wellness tourism in other countries? Prevent the emergence of therapies from other countries that surpass those from the local area. It is anticipated that Bali will establish its own distinctive identity, thereby enhancing the Bali wellness tourism brand.” (I3, I6)

Nonetheless, there are still certain therapies from other places, such as the Turkish hammam spa and bath or the Korean scrub, which would be more appealing if provided in their countries of origin. In addition to spas, there is also a local tradition that is currently popular with tourists, namely Melukat. Some hotels work with local people (shamans) to provide this traditional ritual.

“Melukat in Bali is a spiritual self-cleansing ceremony that aims to purify the soul and mind from negative energy. This ritual is performed using holy water, which is believed to cleanse the body and mind from all impurities.” (I4)

According to Tjok Bagus Pemayun, head of the Bali Tourism Department, Melukat can be a form of spiritual tourism. Several places are used as locations for Melukat, including rivers, springs, temples, seas, fountains, and water that is purified by Hindu priests in their homes, like Pura Tirta Empul Tampak Siring Gianyar, the Waterfall in Sebatu Gianyar, Sudamala Bangli, Pancoran Solas in Bangli, and Pura Tamba Waras Tabanan ([Itsnaini & Widianti, 2022](#)).

The cultural aspects of wellness tourism are equally significant, as they enhance the travel experience by offering guests a glimpse into local traditions, medicinal practices, and culinary offerings that promote health ([Moscardo, 2014](#); [Lemy et al., 2025](#)). For instance, the wellness experience can be improved by incorporating local wellness traditions, such as specific dietary practices or local therapeutic arts, which can facilitate a distinctive cultural exchange ([Moscardo, 2011](#)). It is important to note that the utilization of local ingredients in meals not only benefits the local economy but also contributes to a comprehensive wellness experience by providing wholesome and nutritious food options. The cultural richness of Ubud is reflected in the traditional ceremonies carried out daily by the local population. Men and women wear traditional clothing and make offerings to their gods, creating a unique sight that tourists would never see in their native places.

The wellness tourism sector has become increasingly intertwined with the sustainability of the environment and culture. The emphasis of development strategies is often on immersive experiences that incorporate local culture and ecological preservation, including wellness offerings that are rooted in traditional practices, like healing and mindfulness ([Sanjaya et al., 2024](#)). Wellness tourism destinations can increase their authenticity and appeal by attracting a more diverse clientele that is interested in transformative experiences through engaging with an environment to establish these connections ([Feng et al., 2021](#)), like in the Puri Damai Facility:

“Our location attracts numerous foreigners who are in search of traditional herbal remedies for their ailments. Hundreds of medicinal plants are present in our garden, with the

majority of them being the property of pharmacy, biology, and medical students who are granted internships. In addition to physical health, we offer mindfulness rituals to enhance visitors' concentration." (I4)

In addition to local traditions and wisdom, environmental features are the primary element that considerably increases the appeal of a destination in the context of wellness tourism. A serene environment that encourages relaxation and rejuvenation is created by natural surroundings, including mountains, forests, beaches, and lakes. The primary motivation for many wellness travelers is the ability to disconnect from the stresses of daily life, which is facilitated by the presence of pure air, natural landscapes, and scenic views (T. J. Lee et al., 2020). Additionally, destinations that prioritize sustainable tourism practices—including eco-friendly resorts and conservation initiatives—are becoming increasingly appealing to modern travelers. Ubud has a natural beauty with views of rice fields, rivers, and cool air. Many resorts, yoga studios, and spas are built with a sustainability concept. The resorts or spa buildings have tropical architecture using natural materials, like wood, bamboo, and stone.

Wellness tourism is significantly influenced by the availability of recreational activities, in addition to the natural and cultural elements. Wellness travelers frequently pursue activities such as meditation, yoga, hiking, and spa treatments (Lopes & Rodríguez-López, 2022). Destinations that offer structured wellness programs or retreats, as well as personalized wellness itineraries, can offer travelers transformative experiences that are customized to their unique health objectives. A destination can substantially distinguish itself within the wellness tourism sector by its recreational features, such as hiking trails or wellness-focused events like yoga festivals. Ubud has several recreational activities, such as walking or cycling along the edge of rice fields, rafting, learning to cook traditional dishes, and learning to dance and paint. All of these add to the attraction for tourists who come to Ubud.

4.3. Governance and Capacity-Building Mechanism

The principles of community-based tourism include local community participation in the planning, development, and administration of tourism development. In this case, it is wellness tourism. In Regional Regulation No. 10 of 2015, concerning the Bali Provincial Tourism Development Master Plan for 2015 to 2029, it is stated in Article 13 that tourism destination development is to be achieved through community empowerment. It continues in Article 34 that the pursuit of community empowerment includes (1) the development of the potential and capacity for community participation through tourism development; (2) the optimization of gender equality through tourism development; (3) increasing the potential and capacity of local resources through the development of productive economic enterprises in the tourism sector; and (4) increasing the awareness and the role of the community and related stakeholders in realizing tourism awareness and the seven charms (Sapta Pesona) to create a conducive climate for local tourism.

"Improvement of standards is required to enhance the quality of wellness tourism, particularly regarding traditional values that will be preserved. Nevertheless, the wellness tourist market's growing demand necessitates that the services provided be of the highest quality. For this reason, training programs are not limited to the development of therapists' skills; they also encompass the development of human resources' communication and service skills. In this context, it is imperative to collaborate with academics and wellness professionals." (I5)

Clear, tiered skill standards, which are already instituted by spa owners, underpin service quality, wage mobility, and destination trust. They would be much better with the support of the government.

“The government policies and assistance are very important. The government must guide all activities that are permitted to occur. We are endeavoring to assist ourselves. However, we would be thrilled if the government provided us with assistance.” (I2)

It can be argued that the development of wellness tourism necessitates the collaboration of a variety of stakeholders, including the government, which will establish policies; business owners and academics, who will provide knowledge and training; and local communities, who can provide traditional values and potential as workers or entrepreneurs. Coordinated, certified training pipelines run by the government, universities, and industry could deliver scalable human capital upgrading.

5. Discussion

Our results show a hybrid CBWT configuration in Ubud, with local dominance in spa ownership and employment with owner-led skill standards, alongside the non-local control of flagship yoga studios/retreats and limited community decision rights in planning. In equity terms, the spa subsector already retains value locally through jobs, supplier linkages, and competence norms; in sustainability terms, governance is weakest where ownership and agenda-setting shift outward. This pattern is consistent with CBT theory on ownership/benefit retention, but departs from the ideal of delegated community power in planning, motivating a comparison with peer destinations that have institutionalized participation via branding, facilitation, policy guardrails, or certification.

Kerala in India aligns wellness around Ayurveda and has experimented with stakeholder-based destination audits and conjoint analysis to co-create branding that operators will actually adopt (the attributes prioritized include “fit with organizational priorities” and “ability to integrate into packages”) (Kandan Parakkal et al., 2024). The stakeholders span state tourism bodies, clinics/therapists, and tour operators; the process functions as a platform for coordination rather than a top-down hierarchy. This shows how a destination can translate indigenous wellness into governable product logics that are scalable across firms (Romão et al., 2022), an approach Ubud could adapt for Usada Bali and Melukat to move from narrative to deployable product standards.

In a previous study regarding community-based wellness tourism in Thailand, the role of a neutral intermediary was demonstrated, as DASTA (Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration) has lifted participation from presence to coordinated power. DASTA develops criteria for community-based tourism; runs capacity building with model communities; and integrates multi-level actors, such as local governments, the Tambon Administrative Organization, associations, and small and medium businesses, with destination-management functions. Its CBT criteria have been recognized by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and piloted as development guidelines (Phanumat et al., 2015). Intermediary governance (DASTA like), systematic training, and participation protocols can move communities up the “ladder” from consultation to partnership. For Ubud, a DASTA-like convenor could formalize community seats, harmonize training/standards across spa and yoga establishments, and mediate policy–practice gaps.

Bhutan anchors wellness/spiritual tourism within a national governance doctrine, Gross National Happiness (GNH), which is implemented through the long-standing “High Value, Low Volume” policy, statutory policy guardrails, and protected-area governance (e.g., Nabji and JDNP cases with community tourism committees and community development funds). The uniqueness (spiritual well-being) is maintained by pricing/permit regimes, conservation first principles, and formalized cultural custodianship, illustrating how policy architecture can protect meaning while channeling benefits locally (Gurung & Scholz, 2008). This approach is a relevant template for Ubud’s sacred springs and rituals.

Although Japan is a developed country, the study of how CBWT is organized in this country gives two complementary lessons. First, network-integrating non-profit organizations, such as the Kurihara Tourism Network, act as horizontal coordinators, building skills and linking producers, municipalities, and small and medium-sized businesses to operationalize CBT in rural settings. This “civil-society Destination Management Organization” role is especially useful where state facilitation is limited. Second, onsen towns (e.g., Kurokawa) sustain their wellness uniqueness via association norms and service culture (omotenashi) management, while the national shinrin-yoku program demonstrates how experiential wellness can be backed by health policy and science-based framing (Ohe, 2018). Together, these mechanisms show how rules, associations, and knowledge actors can hard-code authenticity without commodifying it.

6. Practical Implications

Ubud already exhibits strong local ownership and skills standards in the spa subsector, but displays non-local dominance and thinner community decision rights in the flagship yoga centers/retreats. To convert this hybrid configuration into equitable, sustainable development, governance must (i) move participation from presence to power, (ii) close the subsector gaps in ownership and value capture, and (iii) codify cultural–environmental safeguards as operating rules rather than marketing narratives.

(1) Governance and Institutions

Create a convening intermediary (Ubud Wellness Council) under a quadruple-helix design (government–industry–academia–community) with statutory community seats (desa adat/banjar). Its mandate should include destination planning, standards oversight, conflict resolution, and monitoring. It should adopt participation protocols, such as agenda setting, voting rights, and disclosure of interests, so community roles extend upstream into planning/permits, not only operations. To foster innovation, workforce development, and research, collaborative endeavors among governments, academia, and wellness enterprises should be promoted, through mentorship programs that provide local start-ups with guidance from accomplished entrepreneurs.

(2) Ownership and Local Value Capture

Maintain local majority ownership in spas and institutionalize owners’ competence standards as destination-wide baselines. Introduce shared-equity pathways for yoga centers/retreats (local joint ventures, cooperatives, and community shares) plus local procurement targets to reduce leakage and embed guardianship. It is also important to deploy facilitative finance (credit guarantees, revolving funds) tied to local equity and supplier development.

(3) Human Capital and Standards

Establish a destination competency framework derived from the four owner-defined spa standards, translated into stackable credentials (RPL friendly) delivered by universities/TVET with apprenticeships in partner enterprises. Promote cross-subsector adoption so yoga centers/retreats meet minimum competence and safety/ethics standards, with links to licensing and permits. Offer targeted scholarships and apprenticeships for women and youth to enter into higher-skill roles; allow accessibility audits for inclusive wellness offers.

(4) Cultural Stewardship and Product Design

Protocol-based design for Usada Bali and Melukat: Certified cultural guides, ritual guardianship, consent procedures, and community oversight of narratives. There should be intellectual property and naming guidance to prevent misappropriation and co-branding that foregrounds Balinese custodianship.

(5) Certification and Market Signaling

Launch an Ubud Eco-Wellness Label aligned to the GSTC Criteria (Destination/Industry) and audited by GSTC-accredited bodies to ensure credibility; use recognition for local adaptations and capacity support so that MSMEs can comply. Establish a public registry and buyer guidance (tour wholesalers, OTAs) to promote certified, community-empowering operators.

(6) Environmental Management and Sustainability

In order to preserve the environment, encourage the development of environmentally friendly infrastructure that integrates locally sourced materials, such as bamboo and wood. Encourage environmentally conscious travelers by promoting eco-wellness labels and green certifications. Regulate and supervise wellness tourism activities in close proximity to natural and sacred sites to ensure the preservation of the environment and local spirituality.

7. Conclusions

This study finds that community-based wellness tourism (CBWT) in Ubud is viable but unevenly realized across subsectors. In the spa segment, the predominantly local ownership and locally hired, skills-screened staff already generate meaningful local value capture and consistent service quality. By contrast, the yoga center/retreat segment exhibits greater non-local ownership and weaker community decision rights, raising leakage risks and limiting cultural guardianship. Local participation is strong in operations but limited in planning, which explains the persistent policy–practice gap despite the empowerment rhetoric. We conclude that Ubud’s transition from a *de facto* CBWT system to a fully institutionalized model hinges on four levers: (1) upgrading participation from presence to power via formal community seats and voting rights regarding destination planning; (2) aligning ownership with benefit retention (maintaining the local majority in spas and introducing shared-equity pathways for yoga centers/retreats); (3) systematizing human capital through destination-level competency frameworks and stackable credentials derived from owners’ standards; and (4) governing culture and spaces by protocol and zoning (e.g., Usada Bali/Melukat guardianship, buffers/time-slotting near sacred and sensitive sites), signaled to the markets via credible, GSTC-aligned certification. These instruments can convert indigenous wellness assets into an enforceable advantage—supporting equity, authenticity, and ecological carrying capacity—while offering a transferable template for other wellness hubs.

From a policy and stakeholder perspective, the results point toward several practical recommendations. The government can play a central role by establishing an Ubud Wellness Council that adopts a quadruple-helix model (government–industry–academia–community), ensuring that local communities have formal representation in decision-making. Facilitative financial schemes, such as credit guarantees or revolving funds, can empower local entrepreneurs to enter the wellness sector and reduce dependence on external ownership. Protocol-based cultural guardianship of traditional practices, such as Usada Bali and Melukat, should be institutionalized in development guidelines to safeguard their authenticity and heritage while meeting the growing global demand. These recommendations directly link local realities with sustainable tourism policy frameworks, offering a roadmap for stakeholders to pursue equity, cultural integrity, and ecological sustainability.

This study opens several avenues for future research. Scholars should explore post-pandemic tourism trends, particularly how the demand for authenticity, safety, and sustainability has reshaped wellness travel in Bali and other culturally rooted destinations. Comparative and longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of community-based wellness tourism on livelihoods, governance, and cultural preservation. Furthermore, more empirical research from the visitor perspective, such as surveys on the willingness

to pay for authentic, protocol-governed experiences, would enrich the understanding of demand-side dynamics. By advancing this agenda, future research could provide a stronger evidence base to guide both policy and practice in institutionalizing community-based wellness tourism.

Limitations of the Study

This is a single-case, cross-sectional qualitative study focused on Ubud; its external validity is therefore limited. The interview sample was purposive and may not have captured the full spectrum of operators (especially smaller or informal yoga/retreat enterprises); the responses are susceptible to self-report and social desirability bias. We did not access the firm-level financials, so leakage and value-capture were inferred from the ownership and employment patterns rather than directly measured. The micro-spatial pressures discussed (e.g., proximity to sacred springs, traffic/water stress) were not assessed with full environmental accounts or continuous monitoring data. On the human capital side, we documented owner-defined competence standards but did not provide quasi-experimental evidence on the causal impact of credentialing on wages or quality. Finally, the comparative discussion draws on secondary cases from other destinations; the heterogeneity in laws, land tenure, religious authority, and administrative capacity constrains direct transplantation of models.

Future research should (i) conduct triangulations with visitor-side surveys and operators' financial microdata to quantify value retention and willingness to pay for protocol-governed experiences; (ii) employ longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate shared-equity schemes, training pipelines, and certification effects. Cross-case testing of the decision-rights rubric across Global South wellness hubs would further refine the theory on participation quality.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Interviewees' profiles.

Entity/Company	Gender	Duration (Minutes)	Interview
Indonesia Women Entrepreneurs Association, Bali Chapter.	F	50	I1
Lecturer and Head of the Laboratorium of MICE, the Head of International Cooperation at Universitas Udayana, Bali. Director of the Vaastu Explorer Tour.	F	115	I2
Corporate General Manager of Maca Group (Villa and Spa).	M	40	I3
Owner of Puri Damai Heritage, a facility that specializes in the cultivation of medicinal plants and traditional ceremonies to promote well-being.	F	103	I4
Lab Head, Bali Tourism Polytechnic.	F	55	I5
Chairman of the Association of Hospitality Leaders Indonesia (AHLI).	M	55	I6

Source: Author's elaboration.

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