

A Comprehensive Review of Wellness through Equestrian Tourism: Resources, Operator Awareness, and Innovative Approaches for Development

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive review explores the integration of wellness and equestrian tourism, focusing on the resources required for development, operator awareness, and innovative approaches. The methodology involves carefully investigating current scholarly research publications, and case studies to highlight the important patterns, difficulties, and best practices in this emerging sector. This review is important because it discusses the rising desire for sustainable and holistic travel experiences and shows how equestrian activities and wellness practices combine to create a special market potential. Inadequate infrastructure, operator flexibility to changing consumer tastes, and the difficulty of balancing sustainability with market needs are some of the primary topics covered. This review offers insightful advice for operators and stakeholders attempting to navigate this dynamic industry and suggests that sustained innovation, operator education, and cooperation are critical to the sustainable growth of wellness and equestrian tourism.

Keywords: Wellness, Equestrian tourism, Comprehensive review, Equine operator, Innovative approaches

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Wellness in tourism is defined as integrating physical, mental, and emotional well-being into the travel experience, with the primary goal of promoting holistic health via activities and places that encourage relaxation, rejuvenation, and self-care. According to Smith and Puczkó (2014), wellness tourism comprises a wide range of offers, including spa treatments, fitness programs, meditation retreats, and nature-based activities, all catering to travellers looking to better their quality of life and health. The industry has grown rapidly in recent years, owing to increased consumer interest in health-conscious travel and a global move towards preventative healthcare. According to Chen et al. (2020), wellness tourism is increasingly regarded as a transforming experience, allowing people to escape from the demands of everyday life, reconnect with themselves, and engage in behaviours that promote long-term well-being. As a result, wellness tourism improves individual health and promotes sustainable tourism practices by emphasising local and authentic experiences that are compatible with environmental and cultural preservation.

Therefore, wellness in equestrian tourism combines the benefits of horseback riding and other equine activities to enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Carr, Vickers, & Coady, 2019). This type of tourism includes activities like riding through stunning landscapes, participating in equine-assisted therapy, and caring for horses, all of which aim to promote relaxation, awareness, and personal growth (Hausberger, Gautier, & Seneque, 2019). Interacting with horses has been found to lower stress, anxiety, emotional regulation, and physical coordination, all of which contribute to a general sense of well-being (Parker, Gans, & Madaleno, 2017). Furthermore, equestrian tourism frequently takes place in natural, quiet settings that promote a stronger

connection with nature, providing an escape from daily tensions and contributing to mental relaxation (McCormick, Gantt, & Huggins, 2020). As a result, this speciality sector provides a unique combination of physical activity, emotional healing, and mental tranquillity, making it an excellent choice for anyone looking for holistic wellness experiences (Bravi, Tosi, & Baldini, 2021).

This study reviews the journal articles Wellness and Equestrian Tourism from recent publications by Sigurdardottir (2018) 'Wellness and Equestrian Tourism – New Kind of Adventure?' The study focuses on the equestrian tourism business offered by the operators who provide product development interrelated equestrian tourism concepts around Iceland. Derived from primary data, researchers suggest that there are prospects for product creation by merging leisurely adventures, equestrian tourism, unique outdoor activities and wellness. The research's theoretical background included slow adventure and adventure tourism, the effects of horses on humans, health, wellbeing, nature, and innovation. But not limited to main approaches including product development and marketing which can boost the equestrian tourism product in Iceland. The data were gathered through open-ended interviews with horse business owners and content analysis.

Although the practice of equestrian tourism ideas in the expansion of equestrian tourism creations appears insufficient, the research has been successfully done. This has been agreed by many authors who study equestrian tourism product development and incorporate health tourism themes. Equestrian tourism product development incorporates health tourism themes. (Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson, 2018; Callender & Lenz, 2019; Jang & Yoo, 2020; Williams & Taylor, 2023). Due to the significance of the health sector in equestrian tourism, the research of health tourism concepts by using equestrian tourism products seems to be demanded by the regional tourism sector. It will add various tourism sectors and help operators gain confidence to promote equestrian tourism activities (Kauppila & Mikkonen, 2022).

This research demonstrates that the notion of assigning awareness into the area of tourism still not apply made its condition into the revolution or product improvement of Iceland's equestrian tourist enterprises. Based on Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson's interview in 2018 with one of the operators of horse-based tourism, there is an importance to increase the amount of skilled riding coaches in equestrian services. This is because the lack of education approaches may cause the level of innovation among the operators in the equestrian tourism industry in Iceland to become low. Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson (2018) agreed that the level of active innovation has the potential to increase if operators tend to work abroad and make more relationships with prospects in the equine or tourism industry throughout the world as well as bring them back to their hometowns to help build equestrian tourism products.

In terms of promoting the business, according to the findings of this study, 28% of equestrian tourist enterprises do not have an active website, indicating a lack of resources for developing the equestrian tourism industry. Sigurdator & Steinhorsson (2018) criticize the findings as there is a need to boost the creativity of tourist goods and enterprises, providing experience for patrons also increasing the effectiveness of the industry of equestrian, not merely restricted to marketing through the web page. It proves in Sigurdator & Steinhorsson's research, that there is a required connection between horses and tourism activity and it may diversify the equestrian product in the specific region (Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson, 2018). Equestrian visitors that return to a tourist destination serve to improve the equestrian tourism industry and propel it towards its long-term sustainability goals (Pavic et. al, 2019).

Furthermore, the research mentioned the lack of understanding of key concepts of wellness, where some of the operators relate concepts like well-being, and welfare to the key concepts. The wellness concept should be understood by each of the operators as the quality or state of being healthy in any condition including body and mind (Schouten & Veldkamp, 2020), especially as the result of deliberate effort (Blount, 2020). The knowledge gained on wellness among operators will help professions of wellness perspectives, training and daily living, especially in conducting equestrian tourism. (Callender & Lenz, 2019). In addition, it is important to conduct comprehensive training and education toward the concept of wellness as it will promote wellness behaviours and practices beyond the training experience. (Blount, 2020).

Despite the lack of development vision toward equestrian tourism products, this research found out the approaches of operators to develop the tourism industry are slightly low. Pavic et al.'s 2019 study found a positive correlation between equestrian tourism conductors' service quality and tourists' satisfaction, which in turn positively influenced their loyalty intentions, a relationship that Mitchell & Schuster also found. The purpose of the review is to evaluate the article's analysis of the integration of wellness practices and equestrian tourism, determining whether or not this intersection is portrayed as a feasible and significant type of travel in contemporary settings.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a mixed approach that combines the elements of qualitative and quantitative research. The researcher applied this mixed research method because it has been developing social and human science fields of study. Another reason the researchers use mixed methods is that one strategy can be compensated by the strengths of the other. The research used a mix of approaches, including quantitative text analysis of business web pages and open-ended interviews with horse-based business operators.

The quantitative content analysis applied by the researcher to examine web-based content, particularly in the context of equestrian tourism. This study was conducted among 1371 businesses recorded at the Icelandic tourism board, focusing on their profile information, services offered, first language, and language of web pages. The analysis was conducted in June 2015, using English, Icelandic, and German text as the preferred languages. This study concentrated on product expansion, marketing, also indications of expansion towards health as well as adventure tourism. The first round of investigation involved defining relevant concepts based on a literature review. The data collection involved tallying words, synonyms, and words with numerous meanings and analysing the importance of advertising data on each web page. This study also considered using content analysis separately with other study approaches to increase the authenticity of findings. Open-ended interview with operators was additionally managed to gather more business information.

The research involved eleven equestrian tourism operators and ten other equestrian businesses in Iceland. Purposive sampling was used, targeting individuals with knowledge about the industry. Operators were contacted by phone and interviewed face-to-face in their homes or working areas, typically in stables. The interviews lasted 25-60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The main aim was to gain insight into the operators' ideas on future product development within their businesses and the equestrian tourism industry. The interviews were inductive, but not specifically related to adventure or health tourism. The main aim was to gain insight into innovation and product development within their field. The interviews were analysed through coding, identifying themes during the analysis.

The motivation for integrating the two methodologies is the assumption that both types of study have substantial value (Linnander, LaMonaca, Brault, Vyahare, & Curry, 2019) and complementary to each other (Hauken, Larsen, & Holsen, 2019). The mixed method approaches can be employed to provide deep insights into research phenomena that cannot be fully comprehended using solely qualitative and quantitative methodologies, particularly when studying complex situations (Poth & Munce, 2020). Hauken, Larsen, & Holsen (2019) agree that blending two methodologies helps to convey and produce a fuller image and allows for a broader assortment of conflicting or complementary opinions for future inquiries. Nevertheless, the limitation of the mixed method may occur in the accuracy of data collection (Fauser, 2018; Timans, Wouters, & Bala, 2019; Fabregues, Hong, Escalante-Barrios, Meneses, & Fetter, 2020), the researchers still received feedback from operators for this mixed method concept. Fauser (2018) argues that by using mixed methods, research may run the risk of answering too many unfocused questions at once. Using mixed methods, the researcher needs to gain appropriate abilities in qualitative and quantitative methods to cope with the difficulties of using their mixed-method approaches (Timans, Wouters, & Bala, 2019).

For this research, mixed methods were used to understand the phenomenon which covers wellness and tourism at the same time. Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson (2018) in their research in northwest Iceland used the same

approaches to investigate the growth of an emerging micro-cluster associated with equestrian tourism through open-ended interviews and web-based document analysis Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson's (2018) research proved that using the mixed methods they were able to collect accurate data that indicate the significance of equestrian tourism for the tourism sector in Northwest Iceland. Furthermore, in the research on service quality for equestrian tourism in Slovenia by Pavic (2019) using mixed methods techniques, the study found that equestrian tourism motives are positively associated with equestrian tourism motivation and overall satisfaction.

In other words, mixing two methods is the best approach for this research as it offers a comprehensive view of phenomena and gives further visions into different mechanisms of a phenomenon, which may assist in building practical theories of equestrian tourism (Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson, 2018; Pavic, Blesic, Petrovic, Radovanovic, & Prisenk, 2019).

FINDINGS

This study's findings suggest that Iceland has significant resources for developing wellness tourism products with a focus on adventure. Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson (2018) agree that the existence of equestrian tourism should be global and become a major tourism product among tourists. In other words, the resources including training modules, equestrian tourism principles and theory should be taught to operators (Kumar & Ghosh, 2023) and conductors in generating new adventure and wellness tourism options for equestrian tourism (Pavic, Blesic, Petrovic, Radovanovic, & Prisenk, 2019). It involves the operators' understanding of many of the resources and possibilities that have been discovered and deemed significant for adaptation to the current circumstance.

This study also discovered that operators declined to evolve their offerings in a targeted manner to support the health tourism market. Tourists nowadays are motivated by things like enhancing their well-being and wellness, as well as visiting destinations with health benefits (Norhanim, 2020). It is argued that operators should improve their service quality to get repeat tourists in their equestrian tourism area (Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson, 2018). It is important to combine education and research regarding equestrian tourism with tourism products and business, as it would create more meaning for tourists and boost the attractiveness of the equestrian industry (Pavic et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Sigurdardottir and Steinthorsson (2018) agreed that worker knowledge and training are essential in equestrian tourism to ensure customer happiness, the safety of both horses and tourists, and service quality.

The findings of this research also mentioned the limited resources for operators running small lifestyle businesses in equestrian tourism. Williams & Taylor (2023) and Greenwood & Pilkington (2020) found that operators face limited resources for professional product development and expansion, making it challenging to enter the highly developed health tourism market. Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson's (2018) research suggests that while equestrian tourism can supplement income, sufficient resources may slow tourism development in their areas. Despite tourism's potential value, the lack of resources and support hinders development progression (Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson, 2018). In this situation, Pavic et al. (2018) suggested regional authorities take part in supporting the resources and offer financial support (Pavic et al., 2019) to operators who give a lot of effort to develop equestrian tourism as a major tourism product.

This study suggests that prospects for merging leisurely wellness, outdoor recreation and adventure innovation in Icelandic equestrian tourism exist. In the research of Sigurdardottir and Steinthorsson (2018), knowledge and innovation were compulsory including the equestrian industry's historical evolution, as well as the presence of enterprises and networks. However, few parties need to be involved in providing knowledge support and innovation approaches including government and equestrian expertise, especially for small entrepreneurs (Pavic et al., 2019) who seek product development and marketing support (Mitchell & Schuster, 2019).

DISCUSSION

The discussion section found adventure tourism's creative and promising path of combining wellness and equestrian travel offers visitors a particular combination of spiritual, emotional, and physical experiences. However, careful consideration of several crucial elements is necessary for the effective development of this sector (Schouten & Veldkamp, 2020; Muñoz & Peinado, 2020; Williams & Taylor, 2023). The first is that different places have different ratios of adventure and wellness (Lin & Schuett, 2021); some thrive because of well-established retreats and infrastructure, while others struggle because of a lack of resources and specialisation (Ringer & Slade, 2018; Kauppila & Mikkonen, 2022). Second, the development of successful wellness and equestrian tourism requires substantial resources, such as trained staff (Gillespie & Skinner, 2019), capital investment (Schouten & Veldkamp, 2020; Kauppila & Mikkonen, 2022), and access to natural environments (Greenwood & Pilkington, 2020). Securing these resources may be challenging for small companies or those in underdeveloped areas (Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson, 2018); therefore, working with local governments or private sector partners is a crucial method for overcoming these obstacles (Gillespie & Skinner, 2019). Lastly, operator awareness is essential for adjusting to the changing needs of travellers looking for multifaceted (Anderson & Wang, 2022) and offering customised wellness and adventure packages (Mothcell & Schuster, 2019), along with the right training (Callender & Lenz, 2019) and industry cooperation (Silva & Lima, 2022), is crucial for operators to stay competitive.

Integration of Wellness and Equestrian Tourism

The article advocates for integrating wellness and equestrian tourism as an innovative form of adventure tourism. Similar to Gillespie & Skinner's (2019) studies, holistic wellness experiences from horseback riding, equine-assisted therapy, and horse-based mindfulness programs. However, the integration of these two forms of tourism varies across different destinations. Some regions have established wellness retreats (Jang & Yoo, 2020), while others struggle with limited infrastructure or expertise (Ringer & Slade, 2018; Kumar & Ghosh, 2023). The article raises the question of how operators can balance these elements to create meaningful and sustainable experiences for visitors.

Resources for the Development of Wellness and Equestrian Tourism

The articles highlight the importance of significant resources, including human and capital, for successful wellness and equestrian tourism products. It highlights the need for skilled staff, wellness professionals, and access to natural landscapes. Capital investment in infrastructure (Greenwood & Pilkington, 2020) and marketing efforts are also crucial (Silva & Lima, 2022). However, resource allocation challenges persist, especially in smaller operators (Callender & Lenz, 2019) or less developed regions (Ringer & Slade, 2018). Collaboration with local governments or private sector stakeholders (Gillespie & Skinner, 2019; Pavic, Blesic, Petrovic, Radovanovic, & Prisenk, 2019; Lin & Schuett, 2021) may be necessary to secure funding and support for these niche tourism products.

Operator's Awareness and Adaptation to Market Trends

The article emphasizes the importance of operator awareness in meeting the evolving demands of modern tourists, who seek multi-dimensional travel experiences that combine relaxation, physical activity, and adventure. This is particularly relevant in equestrian tourism, where visitors seek holistic wellness journeys (Bodkin & Shufflebotham, 2022; Silva & Lima, 2022; Kumar & Ghosh, 2023). Operators must offer specialized wellness and adventure packages, but ensuring adequate training and collaboration across sectors is crucial.

IMPROVEMENT SUGGESTION

While the article emphasises the adventure side of equestrian tourism, it fails to mention the potential for expanding health options that enhance mental and emotional well-being. Equine-assisted therapies, such as

therapeutic riding, equine-facilitated learning, or equine-assisted mindfulness, have been shown to reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, and support mental health (Hausberger, Gautier, & Seneque, 2019; Carr, Vickers, & Coady, 2019), and would be a valuable addition. In response to the increased demand for holistic wellness tourism, the article could also advocate the establishment of specialised wellness retreats that focus on relaxation and self-care through horseback riding, equine interactions, and contemplative activities in nature (Barton, Edwards, & Robinson, 2022). Furthermore, the article could advocate for collaborations between equestrian centres, wellness practitioners, and mental health professionals to develop tailored programs that cater to diverse groups, including those with mental health challenges or disabilities, thereby broadening the appeal of equestrian tourism within the wellness sector (McCormick, Gantt, & Huggins, 2023). The article could provide more actionable insights into how the sector can evolve and attract a broader audience seeking a deeper connection to nature, animals, and personal well-being by positioning equestrian tourism as a therapeutic and wellness-focused experience, rather than just an adventure activity.

CONCLUSION

The concept of health tourism is widely exploited in Icelandic equestrian tourism marketing. This study discussed the successful marketing of health and wellness destinations, which has boosted the competitiveness of tourism locations. Research conducted by Lonker, Fechner and Wahed (2020) agreed that most tourists visit the equine centre from the marketing approaches to do training and therapy. Tourists tend to visit the equine centre because the therapy sessions use horse movements to help people recover from skeletal and neurological diseases (Lonker, Fechner, & Wahed, 2020). Health tourism for equestrian tourism products could be highly recommended by regional authorities, local tourists and any involved parties to ensure the development of the tourism product becomes the main tourism choice (Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson, 2018).

The research also highlights several limitations, such as the subjectivity of wellness experiences (Muñoz & Peinado, 2020; Lonker, Fechner, & Wahed, 2020), possible sample size restrictions (Koutsou & Vassiliadis, 2017) and regional biases (Ringer & Slade, 2018) which could all impact the findings' generalisability despite the optimistic outlook. The scarcity of long-term research, as well as the economic aspects of equestrian tourism, make it impossible to assess the accessibility and sustainability of these services on a larger scale. Ultimately, even though equestrian tourism presents a novel and exciting opportunity for wellness travel, more study is required to fully comprehend the experiences' long-term impacts (Higgins-Desbiolles & Tolkach, 2018), economic feasibility (Lin & Schuett, 2021), and cultural responsiveness across a range of demographics (Anderson & Wang, 2022). The inclusion of a broader range of participants and standardisation of wellness tourism terminology should improve future research and offer more precise insights into the possibilities of this expanding industry.

Furthermore, despite operators' acknowledged awareness of available resources, this study found no evidence of a concentration on producing health or wellness tourism packages. The study demonstrated the operator's comprehension of the opportunities linked to adventures, horses, wellness and nature. Sigurdardottir & Steinthorsson's (2018) research agrees with the high awareness of health tourism, operators can offer service quality to tourists. This research can conclude that wellness and equestrian tourism have a connection to tourism product development.

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