

Healing tourism experiences and their impact on stress and anxiety in Vietnamese university students

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ABSTRACT

Mental health challenges, including stress and anxiety, are prevalent among university students, necessitating innovative approaches to enhance their psychological well-being. Healing tourism, which integrates restorative travel experiences with mental health benefits, has emerged as a promising intervention. However, most existing studies focus on Western contexts and have emphasized general wellness outcomes rather than direct psychological effects, leaving a gap in understanding the impact of wellness on stress and anxiety in non-Western settings such as Vietnam. This study is the first quantitative analysis of healing tourism's psychological impact on Vietnamese university students, offering novel insights into its cultural relevance. Using validated scales, we examined 308 students engaged in tourism activities and found that distance and fascination significantly reduced anxiety, while compatibility was the strongest predictor of stress reduction and self-efficacy, emphasizing the role of culturally resonant tourism experiences. In contrast, extension was weaker associated with mental health outcomes, possibly reflecting cultural differences in perceptions of expansive environments. By addressing these gaps, this study extends theoretical frameworks on healing tourism and provides actionable insights for tourism operators and mental health practitioners in Southeast Asia. Future research should employ longitudinal methods to explore causal relationships and expand the scope to diverse populations and cultural settings.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, Restorative environments, University students, Cultural contexts, Mental health interventions

Introduction

Mental health challenges, including stress and anxiety, have escalated among university students worldwide, intensified by academic pressures and societal demands [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified these issues, underscoring the urgent need for innovative strategies to support psychological

well-being [2]. In this context, healing tourism has emerged as a promising intervention, offering immersive and restorative experiences that promote mental health [3]. However, despite its growing popularity, empirical research on its efficacy remains scarce, particularly in non-Western settings such as Vietnam. Healing tourism, grounded in environmental and psychological theories, involves travel experiences designed to rejuvenate mental and emotional states through engagement with nature, immersive environments, and culturally resonant activities [4, 5]. Studies have highlighted its potential to reduce stress, facilitate emotional recovery, and enhance well-being. For instance, according to Attention Restoration Theory (ART), fascination with natural or esthetically pleasing environments can alleviate cognitive fatigue, while detachment from daily stressors promotes emotional restoration [3, 6]. Similarly, the Person-Environment Fit Theory suggests that a traveler's sense of

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compatibility with their surroundings enhances psychological benefits, reinforcing the importance of culturally tailored tourism experiences [7]. Despite these insights, most research has focused on general wellness outcomes, neglecting specific mental health benefits such as reductions in stress and anxiety [3, 4]. Furthermore, existing studies have primarily examined Western populations, leaving cultural influences on healing tourism underexplored [4, 8, 9].

Vietnam's growing youth population is increasingly engaging in healing tourism in response to mounting mental health challenges. Research indicates that healing tourism, as a subset of health tourism, has gained traction because of its restorative potential for diverse populations, including younger demographics [10, 11]. However, cultural factors, such as Vietnam's emphasis on harmony, collectivism, and contextual compatibility, may influence how individuals experience and benefit from healing tourism. The specific mechanisms through which key healing tourism dimensions, including distance, extension, fascination, and compatibility, impact psychological well-being require further investigation, particularly in non-Western contexts where subjective cultural factors may shape the healing experience [12].

This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between healing tourism experiences and mental health outcomes among university students in Vietnam. Specifically, this study explores how key dimensions of healing tourism influence stress and anxiety, two prevalent but underexplored mental health concerns in this demographic. This research is guided by the following hypotheses:

- Healing tourism experiences, particularly those of distance (psychological detachment) and fascination (sensory immersion), are negatively associated with anxiety.
- Compatibility has the strongest predictive effect on stress reduction, particularly in enhancing self-efficacy.

The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on healing tourism by providing a culturally contextualized perspective on its psychological benefits. This study also provides actionable insights for tourism operators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners. By examining the cultural and psychological dimensions of healing tourism, this research expands current theoretical frameworks and informs the development of wellness tourism strategies tailored to Southeast Asian populations.

Materials and Methods

Study design and sample

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between healing tourism experiences and mental health outcomes, specifically, stress and anxiety, among university students. The target population comprised undergraduate students who had participated in tourism activities within the past year. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling via online platforms targeting university

communities, ensuring broad sample accessibility. The survey was conducted over two weeks, from November 1, 2024, to November 15, 2024.

After rigorous data cleaning, 308 valid responses were retained for analysis. The sample was predominantly female (82.1%), with most respondents in their first year of study (58.4%) representing diverse geographic origins (urban: 65.6%, rural: 34.4%).

Survey instruments

Three validated instruments were used to measure the study variables:

Healing tourism experience scale

The healing tourism experience scale was assessed in four dimensions: distance, extension, fascination, and compatibility [13]. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" [14]. To ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness, the scale was adapted using rigorous translation and back-translation procedures [15, 16].

Perceived stress scale (PSS-10)

The PSS-10, originally developed by Cohen *et al.* (1983), measures perceived stress in everyday life [17]. This study was adapted for the tourism context, focusing on two subdimensions: helplessness and self-efficacy [18]. These dimensions align with prior research on stress factors during travel [19]. The items were rated on a 4-point frequency scale from "never" to "very often" enabling a more targeted assessment of stress within tourism activities [18].

Generalized anxiety disorder scale (GAD-7)

The GAD-7 was used to evaluate symptoms of anxiety related to travel [20]. The items were scored on a 4-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "nearly every day" allowing for a reliable assessment of the participants' anxiety levels during their tourism experiences [21].

Each instrument underwent rigorous testing to ensure its validity and reliability (data not shown).

Data collection and analysis

The survey was administered online, ensuring convenience and accessibility for participants. Before participation, respondents were informed of the study's purpose and were assured of their voluntary involvement. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to validate the measurement constructs, and Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the scales.

For statistical analysis, correlation analyses were conducted to evaluate the relationships between healing tourism dimensions and mental health outcomes. Multiple regression models

identified key predictors of stress and anxiety. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNUHCM-USSH). Although formal ethics approval was not required for collecting anonymous survey responses, the research adhered to strict ethical standards. Participants provided informed consent before participation and were fully briefed about the study objectives, their withdrawal rights, and the assurance of confidentiality.

No sensitive or personally identifiable information was collected. Confidentiality and privacy were rigorously maintained throughout the study in line with institutional and international ethical guidelines. The study ensured compliance with ethical research standards and safeguarded participants' rights and privacy.

Data availability

The dataset generated during this study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, T.V.N.N.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) provide a detailed overview of the participants' responses to the dimensions of healing tourism and mental health outcomes. Participants expressed high levels of agreement with the dimensions of healing tourism, particularly distance, and extension, suggesting a strong appreciation for geographic detachment and temporal flexibility in their healing experiences. In contrast, fascination and compatibility received lower scores, indicating potential areas for enhancing sensory and contextual alignment in tourism offerings.

For mental health outcomes, participants exhibited moderate levels of helplessness and self-efficacy, reflecting varying perceptions of stress and coping mechanisms. Anxiety levels were notably low indicating relatively favorable psychological states among the participants.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of healing tourism dimensions and mental health outcomes

Category	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
Distance	4.20	0.73
Extension	4.05	0.69
Fascination	3.78	0.80
Compatibility	3.76	0.76
Helplessness	9.88	4.46
Self-efficacy	9.77	2.52
Anxiety	0.48	0.49

Correlation analysis

The bivariate correlation analysis revealed significant associations between healing tourism dimensions and mental health outcomes (Figure 1). Distance and fascination were negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -0.145$, $p < 0.05$; $r = -0.151$, $p < 0.01$), emphasizing the role of physical detachment and sensory immersion in reducing psychological distress. These findings underscore the importance of restorative environments in promoting mental well-being.

Compatibility demonstrated the strongest negative correlation with self-efficacy ($r = -0.400$, $p < 0.01$) and helplessness ($r = -0.163$, $p < 0.01$). These results highlight compatibility as a critical factor for stress management and fostering confidence in one's ability to cope with challenges. In contrast, extension showed weaker associations with both stress and anxiety, indicating that its influence may be culturally or contextually dependent. Together, these findings provide nuanced insights into the varying impacts of the dimensions of healing tourism on mental health outcomes.

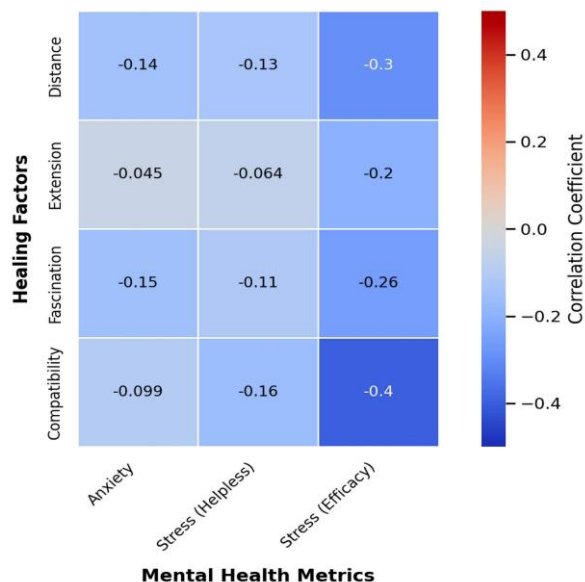


Figure 1. Correlation heatmap of healing tourism dimensions and mental health outcomes

Predictive effects of the dimensions of healing tourism

For anxiety, distance ($\beta = -0.145$, $p < 0.05$) and fascination ($\beta = -0.151$, $p < 0.01$) emerged as significant predictors, as illustrated in Figure 2. These findings, reflected in adjusted R^2 values of 0.018 and 0.020, demonstrate that physical and sensory detachment contributes modestly to alleviating anxiety.

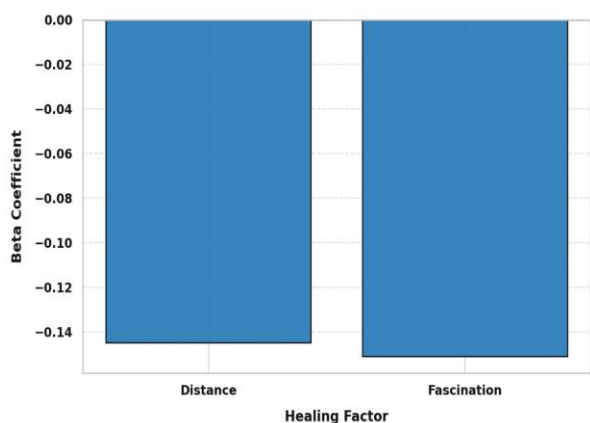


Figure 2. Regression coefficients for anxiety prediction

For helplessness, compatibility was the strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.163, p < 0.01$), followed by distance ($\beta = -0.130, p < 0.05$), as shown in **Figure 3**. These results emphasize the critical role of a personalized and harmonious tourism environment in reducing stress. Adjusted R^2 values for these models ranged from 0.014 to 0.023, providing evidence for their modest explanatory power.

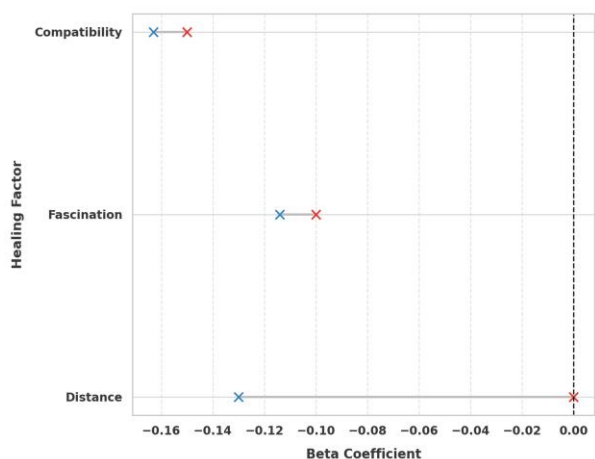


Figure 3. Comparative beta values for stress-helpless prediction

In predicting self-efficacy, compatibility demonstrated the most substantial influence ($\beta = -0.400, p < 0.01$), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.157, highlighting its pivotal role in enhancing confidence and coping abilities. Distance ($\beta = -0.296, p < 0.01$) and fascination ($\beta = -0.255, p < 0.01$) also emerged as significant predictors, although their contributions were comparatively smaller. Extension, consistent with its weaker correlations, exhibited limited predictive power across stress and anxiety outcomes. These results (**Figure 4**) underscore the nuanced roles of the dimensions of healing tourism, with compatibility playing a central role in fostering psychological well-being.

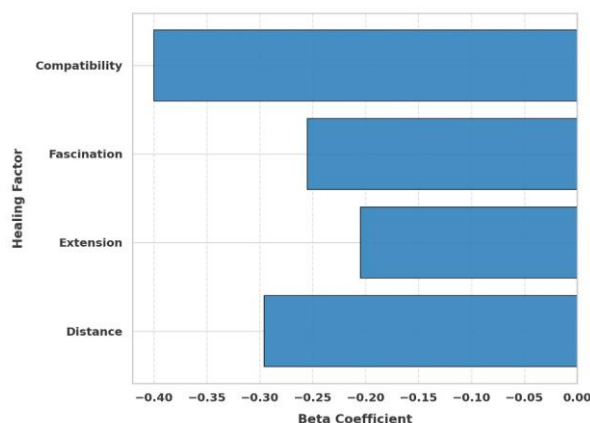


Figure 4. Beta coefficients for stress-efficacy prediction

This study explored the relationship between healing tourism experiences and mental health outcomes, with a focus on stress and anxiety in university students [12, 22]. By examining key dimensions of healing tourism, including distance, extension, fascination, and compatibility, the findings provide valuable insights into how these experiences promote psychological well-being [23, 24].

The results demonstrate that healing tourism experiences have a significant inverse relationship with stress and anxiety. Specifically, distance and fascination were strongly associated with reduced anxiety levels. Distance, which reflects a sense of detachment from everyday life, aligns with existing theories demonstrating that physical and mental separation from stressful environments fosters emotional restoration [25, 26]. The effect of fascination, characterized by immersion in natural or visually engaging surroundings, is consistent with the principles of attention restoration theory. This theory posits that engaging in restorative environments alleviates cognitive fatigue and enhances emotional well-being [27].

Compatibility emerged as the most influential factor in mitigating stress, particularly through its effect on self-efficacy. This finding aligns with environmental psychology perspectives, which emphasize the importance of harmony between individuals and their surroundings in reducing psychological distress. Compatibility likely facilitates ease of adaptation, enabling participants to manage stressors more effectively [28]. Interestingly, the relationship between extension and mental health outcomes was weaker than that between the other dimensions. One potential explanation could be cultural differences in how Vietnamese students perceive expansive environments. Future research should explore whether sociocultural factors influence the salience of this dimension in different contexts [29, 30].

This study extends prior qualitative research by providing quantitative evidence of healing tourism’s impact on mental health. Unlike earlier studies focusing primarily on general well-being or tourism loyalty, this research directly evaluates stress and anxiety, offering a more targeted understanding of healing tourism’s psychological benefits [3]. However, the strong influence of compatibility in this study deviates from findings in Western contexts, in which distance and fascination often

dominate. This discrepancy underscores the potential role of cultural values such as collectivism and contextual harmony in shaping healing experiences in Vietnam [31, 32].

This study's strengths lie in its integration of quantitative methods to evaluate healing tourism and its focus on a culturally specific sample. The use of validated scales and robust statistical analyses provides a reliable framework for future investigations into this emerging field [10]. Additionally, the emphasis on compatibility highlights a unique dimension of healing tourism that warrants further exploration in different cultural contexts. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality, and the sample drawn exclusively from one university may not represent all university students in Vietnam. Furthermore, self-reported measures introduce the possibility of response biases, such as social desirability or recall inaccuracies [33].

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships and explore the temporal dynamics of healing tourism's effects on mental health [34]. Expanding the sample to include participants from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds and geographic regions would enhance generalizability. Qualitative approaches can also provide deeper insights into the subjective dimensions of healing experiences, including their emotional and cultural underpinnings [35].

The findings have practical implications for the tourism and mental health sectors. Tourism operators should design packages that emphasize compatibility, ensuring that offerings align with participants' preferences and needs [10]. Policymakers and university administrators should consider promoting healing tourism as a preventive strategy for addressing young adults' mental health challenges. Integrating healing tourism into student wellness programs could provide accessible and culturally relevant interventions for stress and anxiety [36].

Overall, this study underscores the importance of healing tourism experiences for university students' psychological well-being. This study elucidates the roles of distance, fascination, and compatibility and provides actionable insights for designing more effective and culturally tailored healing interventions. These findings pave the way for future research to deepen our understanding of healing tourism's impact on mental health to inform its application across diverse populations.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence of the positive impact of healing tourism on university students' psychological well-being, particularly in reducing stress and anxiety. By offering the first quantitative analysis in a Vietnamese context, the findings highlight the significance of distance and fascination in alleviating anxiety, while compatibility emerges as the strongest predictor of stress reduction and self-efficacy. These results extend theoretical frameworks such as Attention Restoration Theory and Person-Environment Fit Theory by demonstrating the cultural relevance of healing tourism dimensions in non-Western settings. Additionally, the study provides practical implications

for tourism operators and mental health practitioners, emphasizing the need for culturally tailored healing tourism experiences. Despite its contributions, the research is limited by its cross-sectional design and sample specificity, necessitating future longitudinal studies and diverse participant groups to enhance generalizability. Expanding the investigation to other cultural settings will further refine our understanding of healing tourism's role in mental health. By integrating these insights into tourism planning and wellness initiatives, stakeholders can develop more effective interventions to support university students' psychological well-being.

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Ethics statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles and guidelines established by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNUHCM-USSH). Formal ethical approval was not required because the study involved only the collection of anonymous survey responses from voluntary participants. No sensitive or personally identifiable information was gathered. The study strictly adhered to data protection and privacy regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation, ensuring that they were aware of the study's objectives, procedures, and rights as research subjects. The participants' confidentiality and privacy were safeguarded throughout the research process.

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