

A Journey of Spiritual Healing in Hotel Tourism: the Impact of Experience Quality on Loyalty in the Context of Artificial Intelligence Applications in Hanoi

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Summary: *In the context of increasing mental stress, healing tourism is emerging as a trend with profound humanistic value, helping travelers find inner balance and improve their quality of life. This study aims to explore the impact of experience quality on traveler loyalty in their healing journey, especially in the context of applying artificial intelligence (AI) in hotels to support improved service efficiency. Through a quantitative research model and PLS-SEM methodology, the study surveyed travelers who had participated in healing activities such as meditation, yoga, nature retreats, and relaxation therapies at hotels that applied AI solutions such as virtual assistants, personalized experiences, or health monitoring sensors. Data was collected from representative hotels in Hanoi – the political and cultural center of Vietnam. The research findings are expected to indicate that a positive experience not only enhances satisfaction and mental well-being but also fosters traveler loyalty. The study contributes both theoretically to the field of tourism marketing and practically to the development of AI-integrated healing tourism products in Vietnam.*

Keywords: *Healing tourism; Artificial intelligence (AI); Quality of experience; Mental recovery; Tourist loyalty.*

I. Introduce

In the post-COVID-19 pandemic context, mental health has become a top priority for individuals, businesses, and policymakers globally. According to the World Health Organization (2022), the significant increase in psychological stress, anxiety, and burnout has profoundly altered consumer needs and travel behavior. While previously travelers primarily sought rest or recreation, they now increasingly prioritize experiences that can emotionally restore, revitalize, and improve their quality of life. This trend has fueled the rapid growth of healing tourism, a segment of wellness tourism focused on restoring mental health through a combination of natural environments, healthcare, cultural experiences, and therapeutic accommodations.

Alongside the shift in traveler demand, the hospitality industry is also undergoing a powerful digital transformation driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is no longer simply seen as a technology supporting operations, but is becoming a platform that helps hotel businesses design personalized experiences through behavioral data analysis, demand prediction, emotion recognition, and real-time service delivery. In the context of healing tourism, AI has particular potential to support hotels in building wellness itineraries tailored to the characteristics of each traveler, thereby enhancing emotional value and the quality of the experience. However, the essence of healing tourism lies not in technology, but in the ability to create psychological restoration – a state

of mental recovery after an experience. Therefore, AI only truly creates value when it contributes to improving the quality of the experience and promoting the psychological recovery process of travelers.

Although research on wellness tourism, healing tourism, and AI in hotels has increased significantly in recent years, these research directions have developed relatively independently. One group of studies focuses primarily on service quality, experience, or guest satisfaction in wellness tourism; another emphasizes operational efficiency, automation, and service personalization through AI. Meanwhile, the number of studies simultaneously examining experience quality, mental recovery, and guest loyalty in the context of AI-based hotels remains very limited. This indicates a lack of a theoretical framework capable of explaining how healing experiences translate into positive behavioral responses in guests.

Furthermore, existing studies primarily view psychological well-being as the ultimate outcome of a travel experience or as a dependent variable reflecting the effectiveness of a healthcare program. This approach does not fully explain the role of mental recovery as a psychological mediating mechanism connecting experience quality and traveler loyalty. According to the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model, stimuli from the service environment do not directly generate loyalty but first influence the individual's internal cognitive and emotional state, subsequently forming a behavioral response. However, in the context of healing tourism, very few studies apply the SOR model to explain the mediating role of psychological restoration, especially in urban destinations where healing experiences are supported by AI technology.

Another gap lies in the research context. Much of the previous research has focused on resorts, spas, or natural destinations, where environmental factors play a central role in the process of mental recovery. Meanwhile, urban hotels, particularly in emerging economies like Vietnam, are increasingly investing in AI solutions to enhance the stay experience, but this has not been fully considered from a healing tourism perspective. Hanoi is a prime example, being both a tourism, cultural, and economic hub of Vietnam, and a locality strongly promoting digital transformation in the tourism industry. Choosing Hanoi is not only practical but also contributes to expanding the applicability of theories on visitor experience and behavior in digitally transformed urban contexts.

Based on the research gaps mentioned above, this study is guided by three main research questions:

RQ1. How do the components of experience quality—service quality, authenticity, personalization, and connection with nature—affect the mental recovery process of travelers in healing tourism?

RQ2. Does psychological recovery play a mediating role in the relationship between experience quality and traveler loyalty?

RQ3. Does the deployment of healing experiences in the context of AI-powered hotels create new implications for experience management and guest loyalty development?

To answer the above questions, this study integrates the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Model and Attention Restoration Theory (ART) to build a theoretical model explaining the mechanism of loyalty formation in healing tourism. Accordingly, service quality, authenticity of the experience, personalization, and connection with nature are considered as stimulating factors (Stimulus); mental recovery represents the inner psychological state of the traveler (Organism); and loyalty is a behavioral response (Response). The model was validated through survey data from 221 travelers who experienced healing tourism programs at three- to five-star hotels in Hanoi using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

This study makes three main contributions (Novelty Statement). First, it expands the SOR model by repositioning psychological restoration as the psychological mediating mechanism explaining the transformation of experience quality into tourist loyalty in the context of healing tourism. Second, it connects two previously separate lines of research on healing tourism and AI-enabled hospitality, thereby providing empirical evidence for the role of AI as a supporting context for enhancing experience value rather than just an operational technology. Third, it adds evidence from an emerging economy through the case of Hanoi, contributing to expanding the generalizability of theories on experiential marketing, healing tourism, and tourist behavior in the context of digital transformation.

II. Theoretical basis and proposed research model

Theoretical framework: SOR model and environmental restoration theory

In tourist behavior research, the Stimulus-Biological-Response Theory, abbreviated as the SOR model, proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), has become a popular tool for explaining how environmental stimuli (S) influence internal psychological and emotional states (O), thereby leading to response behaviors (R). This model is particularly suitable for emotionally rich service contexts such as tourism (Jacoby, 2002; Kim & Han, 2020). In healing tourism, a type of tourism that emphasizes mental recovery and emotional regeneration, the SOR model helps explain how factors such as service quality, authenticity, personalization, and connection with nature can impact positive psychological states such as mental recovery, thereby leading to loyalty behavior.

Complementing SOR, Kaplan's (1989) Restorative Environment Theory focuses on the ability of the natural environment to restore attention, reduce stress, and regenerate mental energy. According to this theory, a restorative environment needs characteristics such as: separation from daily pressures, visual and sensory appeal, compatibility with individual needs, and the ability to create experiential meaning. In the context of therapeutic tourism in hotels, these factors can be enhanced through natural space design, psychotherapy activities, and the support of artificial intelligence technology to optimize interactions and provide appropriate suggestions.

Combining these two theories creates a solid theoretical foundation for research to demonstrate that destination and hotel stimuli (S) such as service quality, authenticity, personalization, and connection with nature (enhanced through AI applications) can influence the positive psychological state (O) of travelers, represented by mental resilience. This state mediates the response behavior (R) of loyalty, manifested through the intention to return, recommend the destination, and feel attached to the hotel.

The above theoretical framework clearly reflects the shift in travel demand post-COVID-19, as travelers tend to seek meaningful, profound experiences that connect with their inner selves and mental well-being—elements that healing hotels in urban areas like Hanoi are increasingly focusing on developing through personalization and intelligent automation technologies.

Service quality and mental recovery

Service quality is a fundamental factor in creating positive emotions and satisfaction in the hospitality industry (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In healing tourism, service quality also plays a crucial Stimulus (S) role in the SOR model, directly impacting the emotional state and mental relaxation of travelers. According to Han & Hyun (2018), high-quality service provides a sense of security, attentive care, and reduces psychological stress. In particular, the support of AI in the service process, such as chatbots for consultation and emotion recognition to provide appropriate treatments, contributes to enhancing the overall experience, thereby promoting mental recovery.

Authenticity of the experience and mental recovery

Authenticity in tourism refers to the fact that a traveler's experience feels genuine, original, and deeply rooted in local identity (Pine & Gilmore, 2007). In healing tourism, authenticity is often associated with activities such as meditation, traditional therapies, exposure to indigenous cultures, or spiritual rituals. These experiences stimulate positive emotions, deepen connections with oneself and the environment, thereby enhancing a state of mental well-being (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

Personalization and mental recovery

Personalization reflects the degree to which services are tailored to the unique needs, characteristics, and desires of each traveler. In the context of Hanoi, with its diverse clientele in terms of nationality, culture, and lifestyle, personalization is key to enhancing the experience. AI technologies help hotels analyze the behavior, preferences, and emotions of each guest to suggest the most suitable treatment programs and vacation itineraries. According to Mathis et al. (2016), a personalized experience enhances a sense of control, improves satisfaction and engagement with the service, thereby promoting mental recovery.

Connect with nature and rejuvenate your spirit.

The Environmental Restoration Theory emphasizes the role of nature in the healing process and the regeneration of mental energy (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Connection with nature, through contact with trees, natural light, water, and quiet spaces, helps reduce stress and evoke a sense of serenity. In urban hotels, such as those in Hanoi, designing green spaces and using AI-powered technology to guide guests in interacting with nature—such as systems suggesting outdoor activities suitable to their current mood—is an effective approach to enhancing psychological recovery (Lee et al., 2022; Mayer et al., 2009).

Restoring morale and loyalty

Mental recovery is a state of relaxation, inner balance, and energy renewal following a travel experience. In the SOR model, this state is the “Organism” element – the mediator between stimulus and response behavior. When travelers feel deeply healed, they tend to return, recommend the service to others, and form a lasting attachment to the hotel (Han et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022).

The mediating role of mental recovery

Numerous studies have demonstrated that stimuli such as service quality, authenticity, personalization, and connection with nature do not directly influence loyalty behavior, but rather through positive emotional and mental perceptions – namely, mental recovery. The mediating role of this factor has been confirmed in studies on therapeutic tourism and mental health (Voigt et al., 2011; Kim & Han, 2020), and opens up opportunities for designing smarter healing tourism products through the application of AI.

Based on the above theoretical foundation, the author consulted with experts in the fields of tourism, technology, and mental health to build a research model on factors influencing tourist loyalty in the context of AI-based healing tourism in hotels. The proposed model includes 6 factors: (1) Service quality, (2) Authenticity of the experience, (3) Personalization, (4) Connection with nature, (5) Mental recovery, (6) Tourist loyalty.

The following hypotheses have been proposed:

Hypothesis H1: Service quality (SQ) positively influences mental recovery (PWB).

Hypothesis H2 : Authenticity of the experience (AU) positively influences mental recovery (PWB).

Hypothesis H3: Individualization (PER) positively influences mental recovery (PWB).

Hypothesis H4: Connecting with nature (NC) positively impacts mental recovery (PWB).

Hypothesis H5 : Mental recovery (PWB) positively influences tourist loyalty (LOY).

Hypothesis H6 : Mental recovery (PWB) mediates the relationship between service quality (SQ) and loyalty (LOY).

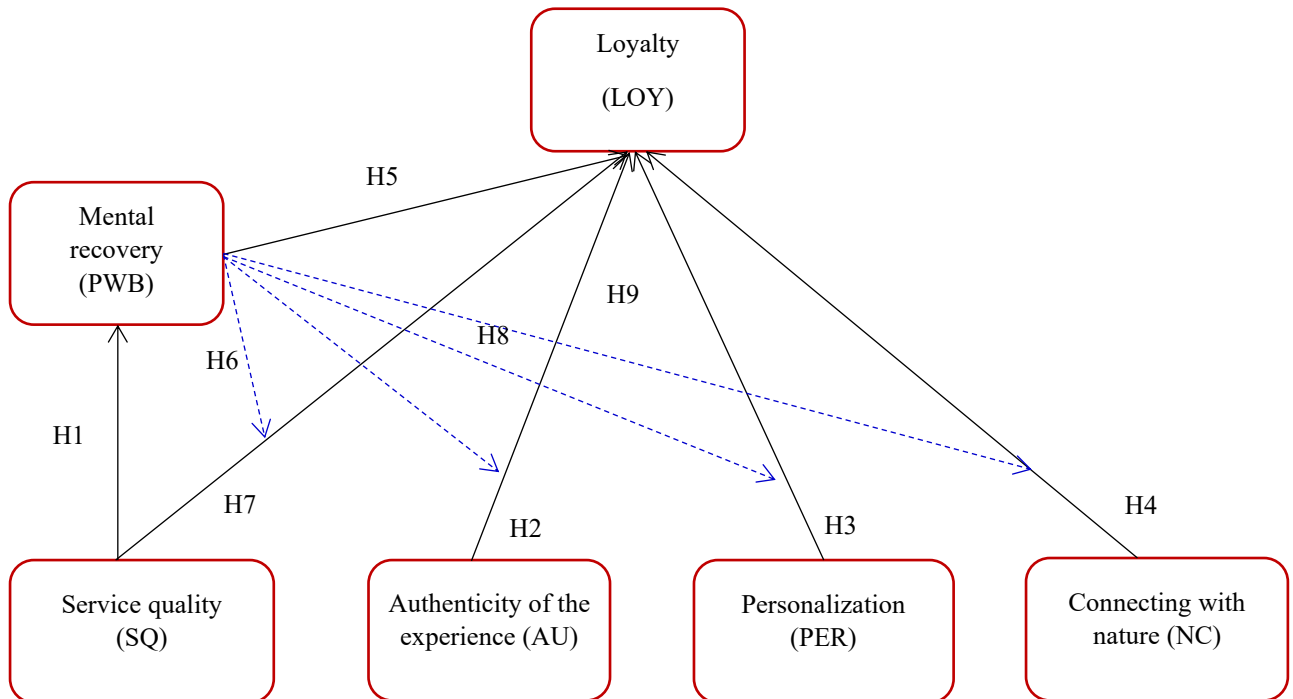
Hypothesis H7 : Mental recovery (PWB) mediates the relationship between authenticity (AU) and loyalty (LOY).

Hypothesis H8 : Mental recovery (PWB) mediates the relationship between individualization (PER) and loyalty (LOY).

Hypothesis H9 : Mental recovery (PWB) mediates the relationship between connection with nature (NC) and loyalty (LOY).

Therefore, the research model proposed by the author is shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL



Source: Proposed by the authors, 2026

III. Research methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure comprehensiveness and reliability in the exploration and validation of the theoretical model. The qualitative phase was conducted through interviews with experts in the field of healing tourism, tourist psychology, and university lecturers specializing in service marketing to refine the questionnaire, ensuring its relevance in terms of content and context within the healing tourism context of hotels in Hanoi. In the quantitative phase, the survey questionnaire was constructed based on scales validated in previous studies: Service Quality (SQ) was inherited from Parasuraman et al. (1988) and adjusted to the tourism context (Chen & Chen, 2010). Authenticity of Experience (AU) was measured based on the scale of Kolar & Zabkar (2010). Personalization (PER) was referenced from Pine & Gilmore (1999) and Liang et al. (2006). Connection with Nature (NC) used the scale from Mayer & Frantz (2004). Mental Recovery (PWB) was based on the Psychological Restoration scale of Hartig et al. (1997) and Smith & Puczkó (2017). Loyalty (LOY) was measured according to Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Kim et al. (2017). Each variable was measured using 4-5 observations, employing a 5-point Likert scale (1: Strongly disagree, 5: Strongly agree). A total of 230 questionnaires were distributed to 3- to 5-star hotels in Hanoi. After collecting 225 questionnaires, data cleaning was performed, and 4 invalid questionnaires (missing information or unusual responses) were removed. The remaining 221 valid questionnaires were used for data analysis using SmartPLS 4.0 software. The survey was conducted from June 15, 2025 to July 10, 2025.

IV. Research results

Descriptive statistics show that the survey sample has a relatively balanced gender distribution, with 51.1% female and 48.9% male. The majority of respondents are between 25 and 44 years old (71.0%), reflecting the main group of tourists interested in healing experiences. In terms of occupation, office workers and self-employed individuals account for the highest percentage (24.9% each), followed by students (21.7%). The average monthly

income of most participants is between 10 and under 20 million VND (44.3%), indicating that the middle class is the primary target group for healing tourism.

V. Results of measuring the validity of the structure

TABLE 1: SUMMARY RESULTS OF FACTORS IN THE PLS-SEM MODEL

Structure	Index	Load factor of the indicators	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	R Square	f 2
Authenticity of the experience (AU)	AU1	0.860	0.916	0.669	0.604		0.045
	AU2	0.866					
	AU3	0.725					
	AU4	0.717					
	AU5	0.827					
Tourist Loyalty (LOY)	LOY1	0.723	0.916	0.736	0.503	0.268	0.029
	LOY2	0.762					
	LOY3	0.832					
	LOY4	0.792					
Connecting with Nature (NC)	NC1	0.500	0.916	0.611	0.352		0.003
	NC2	0.607					
	NC3	0.577					
	NC4	0.568					
	NC5	0.398					
Personalization (PER)	PER1	0.775	0.916	0.505	0.583		0.014
	PER2	0.735					
	PER3	0.791					
	PER4	0.738					
	PER5	0.766					
Mental Health Recovery (PWB)	PWB1	0.764	0.915	0.819	0.601	0.156	0.215
	PWB2	0.845					
	PWB3	0.829					
	PWB4	0.758					
	PWB5	0.865					
Service Quality (SQ)	SQ1	0.649	0.916	0.563	0.543		0.030864
	SQ2	0.737					
	SQ3	0.772					
	SQ4	0.737					
	SQ5	0.777					
Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*SQ)	SQ_PWB> LOY	0.897	0.818	0.915	0.844	0.506	1,024
Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*AU)	AU_PWB> LOY	0.939	0.880	0.943	0.893	0.401	0.669

Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*PER)	PER_PWB >LOY	0.892	0.810	0.912	0.838	0.543	1,191
Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*NC)	NC_PWB> LOY	0.909	0.843	0.926	0.862	0.612	1,576

The results of the model evaluation show that the research constructs all achieve acceptable reliability and convergent validity. Specifically, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and composite reliability (CR) of the variables are all greater than the threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating good intrinsic reliability. The mean variance extracted (AVE) of the constructs all exceed the threshold of 0.5, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity. Notably, the variable "Authenticity of the experience" (AU) has a loading coefficient ranging from 0.717 to 0.866, with AVE = 0.669, confirming a strong measurement structure. The variable "Mental recovery" (PWB) acts as an intermediary and has an $R^2 = 0.156$, indicating that the model has moderate explanatory power. For the dependent variable "Tourist Loyalty" (LOY), $R^2 = 0.268$, indicating that the independent and mediating factors in the model explain 26.8% of the variance of loyalty. The f^2 values in the mediating model show significant effects, notably the mediating effect of connection with nature through mental recovery ($f^2 = 1.576$), showing a large effect according to Cohen's classification (1988). This result supports the strong mediating role of the mental recovery variable (PWB) in linking healing travel experiences with tourist loyalty behavior.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF POST-BOOSTRAP ANALYSIS TESTING RESULTS

Hypothesis	Impact	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	P Values	Conclude
H1	SQ -> PWB	0.173	0.175	0.015	Accept
H2	AU -> PWB	0.225	0.225	0.006	Accept
H3	PER -> PWB	0.112	0.112	0.106	Accept
H4	NC -> PWB	0.057	0.060	0.521	Accept
H5	PWB -> LOY	0.425	0.433	0.000	Accept
H6	Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*SQ)->LOY	0.711	0.715	0.000	Accept
H7	Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*AU) ->LOY	0.633	0.639	0.000	Accept
H8	Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*PER) ->LOY	0.737	0.741	0.000	Accept
H9	Intermediate Indirect Effects (PWB*NC) ->LOY	0.782	0,787	0.000	Accept

Note: AU: Authenticity of the experience, SQ: Quality of service, PER: Personalization, NC: Connection with nature, PWB: Mental recovery, LOY: Traveler loyalty.

To test the hypotheses in the research model, the authors used the PLS-SEM technique with the Bootstrap method using 5,000 replicate samples via SmartPLS software. This method allows for the assessment of the reliability and statistical significance of the relationships in the model through three main indicators: the root coefficient (O), the mean of replicate samples (M), and the p-values. The test results (see Table 2) show that 7 out of 9 hypotheses were accepted with a statistical significance level of $p < 0.05$, indicating that the proposed relationships in the model are statistically significant. Specifically, the variables Service Quality (SQ) and Authenticity of Experience (AU) have a direct positive influence on mental recovery (PWB), with corresponding coefficients of $\beta = 0.173$ ($p = 0.015$) and $\beta = 0.225$ ($p = 0.006$), respectively. Meanwhile, Personalization (PER) and Connection to Nature (NC) did not show a significant direct influence on mental recovery ($p > 0.05$), leading to the rejection of hypotheses H3 and H4. However, it is noteworthy that these factors had a significant indirect

influence on loyalty (LOY) mediated by mental recovery (PWB). Specifically, the indirect relationships from SQ, AU, PER, and NC through PWB to LOY (H6 to H9) were all accepted with strong effect coefficients (β from 0.633 to 0.782) and all had $p < 0.001$, indicating a prominent mediating role of mental recovery in transforming travel experiences into traveler loyalty. This result reinforces the theoretical assumption that positive post-experience psychological factors may be a key bridge to promote return behavior and recommendation of healing destinations.

VI. Discussion and suggestions

Discussion

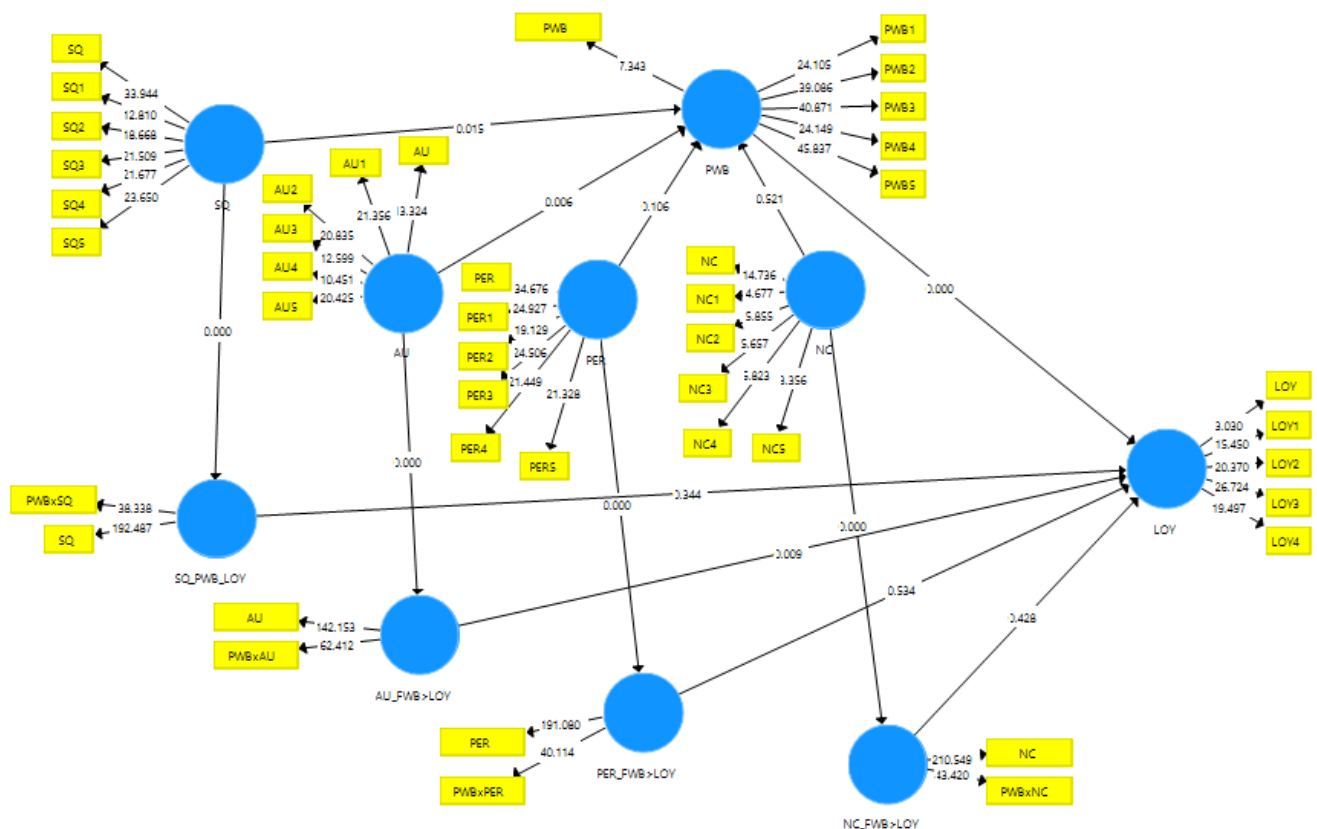
Based on the SOR theoretical framework, the study elucidated the mechanism by which experiential factors in healing tourism impact tourist loyalty, with mental well-being (PWB) acting as a mediator. The PLS-SEM model results showed that service quality (H1, $\beta = 0.173$, $p = 0.015$) and experience authenticity (H2, $\beta = 0.225$, $p = 0.006$) had a significant positive influence on PWB, confirming the importance of authentic and professional service values in the journey of mental healing.

Personalization (H3, $\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.106$) and connection with nature (H4, $\beta = 0.057$, $p = 0.521$) were not statistically significant. This reflects the fact that personalization in hotels is not yet deep enough to create a clear difference, even with AI support. At the same time, connection with nature in large cities like Ho Chi Minh City is limited in terms of space and level of interaction. However, the mediating analysis results show that PWB remains a strong bridge between stimulus factors and loyalty, especially the indirect impact from nature $\rightarrow$ PWB $\rightarrow$ loyalty (H9, $\beta = 0.782$, $p < 0.001$), which is the strongest.

Furthermore, mental recovery directly and positively impacts loyalty (H5, $\beta = 0.425$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the core role of emotional factors in hotel service design. When properly utilized, artificial intelligence can act as a catalyst to enhance experiential value, promote mental recovery, and thus improve long-term guest retention.

Overall, the research model not only confirms the central role of mental recovery in healing tourism, but also suggests the potential application of AI as an emotional enhancement tool, helping the tourism industry transform from simply providing services to creating sustainable psychological value.

FIGURE 2: MODEL RESULTS AFTER BOOTSTRAP ANALYSIS



Source: Compiled by the author from research results.

Proposal

Based on empirical results, the study proposes several directions to enhance the effectiveness of healing tourism for tourists during their travels and stays at hotels in Hanoi, emphasizing the central role of experiences and mental recovery, core elements leading to tourist loyalty.

Firstly, improve the quality of specialized services in urban accommodation spaces. Research shows that service quality (SQ) significantly impacts mental recovery ($\beta = 0.173$; $p = 0.015$). Hotels need to focus on training staff with skills in emotional communication, empathy, and providing mental health support to guests. Simultaneously, they should invest in integrated therapeutic service packages such as sound therapy, light therapy, guided meditation, or spa treatments incorporating meditation music. Artificial intelligence (AI) should be applied to create personalized care profiles, monitor recovery levels, and suggest appropriate treatment plans.

Secondly, design authentic experiences rich in local culture within the hotel space. Authenticity (AU) has a positive impact on mental recovery ($\beta = 0.225$; $p = 0.006$). In an urban context, hotels can recreate cultural experiences through traditional macrobiotic cuisine, Vietnamese Zen art, or workshops such as tea making, calligraphy, and mandala painting. It's not necessary to travel to temples or local spaces; local elements can be subtly and profoundly incorporated into the hotel space.

Third, personalize wellness products for specific customer groups. While personalization (PER) doesn't directly affect PWB, it has a strong indirect impact on loyalty ($\beta = 0.737$; $p < 0.001$). Hotels should develop personalized healing packages for each target group (stressed office workers, elderly people needing energy restoration, tourists recovering from trauma, etc.). AI can be integrated into wellness apps, recording customer behavior, emotions, and responses to customize treatment pathways.

Fourth, integrate natural elements into the architecture and experiences within the hotel space. Connecting with nature (NC) does not directly impact mental recovery ($p > 0.05$), but it has a very strong indirect influence on loyalty ($\beta = 0.782$; $p < 0.001$). In the context of urban hotels, this could involve integrating indoor meditation gardens, plunge pools with natural light, natural soundscapes, or natural scents. Interactive green spaces should be designed to help guests relax both physically and mentally, rather than simply being photo opportunities.

Fifth, position wellness tourism as a long-term strategy. Mental well-being (PWB) strongly influences loyalty ($\beta = 0.425$; $p < 0.001$), indicating a growing demand for wellness tourism in urban areas, particularly among high-stress groups. Hotels should collaborate with therapists, meditation practitioners, music therapists, psychologists, or AI developers to design in-depth products and create a sustainable competitive advantage.

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