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Knowledge and Perception of Indigenous-Inspired Spa among Entrepreneurial Undergraduate Students at Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, the development of Indigenous-inspired spas provides not only economic opportunities but also supports cultural sustainability. The purpose of this study was to assess the knowledge and perceptions of Indigenous-inspired spas among entrepreneurial undergraduate students. A cross-sectional survey was conducted involving 358 students enrolled in entrepreneurial related programs at the Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism, and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. The results demonstrated that while participants held generally favorable perceptions, their overall knowledge was limited. Product knowledge ($r = 0.652$, $p < 0.001$) and service knowledge ($r = 0.660$, $p < 0.001$) showed moderate positive correlations with perception, while operation knowledge demonstrated a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.511$, $p < 0.001$). Educational interventions and specialized training modules should be developed to enhance students' competencies, address misconceptions, and prepare future wellness, tourism, and hospitality entrepreneurs for active involvement in Malaysia's Indigenous-inspired spa industry.

1. Introduction

The Indigenous-inspired spa represents a culturally embedded wellness practice that integrates Indigenous knowledge systems with modern spa services, contributing to the diversification of global wellness tourism [1,2]. As the wellness tourism industry continues to experience rapid growth globally, such culturally rooted wellness products offer unique experiences that align with increasing consumer interest in authenticity, sustainability, and holistic well-being [3]. The Global Wellness Institute, [4] estimates that the global wellness economy was valued at approximately \$3.7 trillion, demonstrating its significant economic and social impact.

In the Malaysian context, wellness tourism has been actively promoted as a strategic sector to attract both domestic and international visitors, with the spa sector recognized as one of the most

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profitable components of this industry [5,6]. Malaysia's multicultural society provides a unique foundation for developing Indigenous-inspired spas that utilize traditional healing knowledge, natural resources, and cultural rituals specific to Indigenous communities [7-8]. These spas not only offer therapeutic treatments but also serve as platforms for preserving cultural heritage and empowering Indigenous communities economically [9].

The concept of Indigenous-inspired spas encompasses multiple domains of knowledge, which include product knowledge that involves the use of natural and botanical ingredients; service knowledge that pertains to the application of traditional healing techniques; and operational knowledge that reflects management structures grounded in Indigenous cultural values [10-12]. The integration of such knowledge elements enhances the authenticity and attractiveness of Indigenous-inspired spa experiences [13]. Nevertheless, public awareness and understanding of Indigenous-inspired spas remain limited, particularly due to the marginalized status of Indigenous populations and limited marketing efforts targeting wider audiences [14-16].

Among factors influencing knowledge and perception towards Indigenous-inspired spas are individual demographics, cultural background, educational exposure, and previous experiences with spa services [17,18]. Knowledge and perception are interrelated constructs that shape individuals' attitudes, acceptance, and decision-making behavior concerning wellness products [19,20]. Understanding these factors is particularly important within the context of entrepreneurship education offered in hospitality, tourism, and wellness programs, where future spa-preneurs, wellness practitioners, tourism operators, and hospitality professionals are being trained.

Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), which offers comprehensive entrepreneurship-based programs under the Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness, serves as a critical platform for cultivating future leaders in Malaysia's expanding wellness, hospitality, and tourism industries. As these students represent future industry stakeholders, assessing their understanding and perception are crucial for developing educational interventions and policy recommendations that support the growth of Indigenous wellness enterprises.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design and Context

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to assess the knowledge and perception of Indigenous-inspired spas among entrepreneurial undergraduate students. The research was conducted at the Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Malaysia, which offers a range of entrepreneurship-based undergraduate programs across the fields of wellness, hospitality, and tourism. As a university with a strong focus on developing entrepreneurial competencies in the service sector, UMK provides an appropriate context for investigating students' knowledge and perceptions related to Indigenous-inspired spa practices. This population was selected as they represent future professionals, practitioners, and entrepreneurs who may contribute to the development of Malaysia's wellness tourism industry.

2.2 Sample Size

The G*Power software was used to estimate the required sample size for this study. The target population comprised 1,500 students currently enrolled in entrepreneurship-related programs at the Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism, and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK). Based on a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error, the estimated minimum sample size was calculated to be 358.

2.3 Research Instruments

To collect the data, a self-administered questionnaire was utilized. The questionnaire was structured into four sections. The first section collected demographic information, including age, gender, program enrolled and year of study. The second section captured participants' sources of information regarding Indigenous-inspired spas. The third section assessed participants' knowledge related to Indigenous-inspired spa products, services, and operations. The fourth section evaluated participants' perceptions towards Indigenous-inspired spas using 6 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

2.4 Data Collection

The data collection was conducted at the Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism, and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, from April to September 2024. The data were collected through face-to-face distribution of questionnaires during scheduled class sessions. The questionnaires were distributed to the randomly selected students from each academic program (stratum), following the stratified random sampling approach. Completion of the questionnaire required approximately 7 to 10 minutes. Prior to distribution, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to all participants, and written informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data was coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0. Socio-demographic and academic variables were summarized using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and ranges. Normality of the data was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which indicated that the data were normally distributed. Correlations between knowledge dimensions and perception scores were assessed using Pearson correlation coefficient.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

A total of 358 entrepreneurial undergraduate students participated in the study. The majority of participants were female (75.7%), and most were between 22 and 26 years old (90.2%; $M = 23.16$ years, $SD = 2.38$). In terms of ethnicity, most participants were Malay (90.5%). The majority were enrolled in the Wellness Entrepreneurship program (55.8%), and most were in their third year of study (30.7%). Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the participants (N=358)

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	87	24.3
	Female	271	75.7
Age Group (years)		M=23.16	SD=2.38
	18-21	72	20.1
	22-26	323	90.2
	>26	13	3.6
Ethnicity	Malay	324	90.5
	Chinese	6	1.7
	Indian	19	5.3
	Others	9	2.5
Program of Study	Wellness Entrepreneurship	200	55.8
	Tourism Entrepreneurship	80	22.3
	Hospitality Entrepreneurship	78	21.8
Year of Study	Year 1	60	16.8
	Year 2	90	25.1
	Year 3	110	30.7
	Year 4	98	27.4

3.2 Sources of Knowledge among Study Participants

Among the respondents, the Internet was identified as the most common source of knowledge regarding Indigenous-inspired spas, reported by 285 participants (79.6%). Other sources included spa visits (7.3%), word-of-mouth (6.1%), flyers or pamphlets (4.2%), television (2.2%), and newspapers (0.6%). Table 2 presents the distribution of sources of knowledge among the study participants.

Table 2
Sources of knowledge of spa

Sources of knowledge	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Internet	285	79.6
Spa Visit	26	7.3
Word of Mouth	22	6.1
Flyers or Pamphlets	15	4.2
Television	8	2.2
Newspapers	2	0.6

3.3 Descriptive Analysis of Knowledge Score (K-Score)

The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the knowledge score data were normally distributed; therefore, mean K-scores are reported. Participants' knowledge was assessed across three domains: product knowledge, service knowledge, and operation knowledge, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree), where higher mean scores reflect lower knowledge levels. The descriptive analysis of participants' knowledge regarding Indigenous-inspired spas was evaluated across three domains which are product knowledge, service knowledge, and operation knowledge are shown in Table 3.

For product knowledge, most participants demonstrated limited understanding. The majority disagreed or strongly disagreed that Indigenous-inspired spa products are designed to nurture all skin types (77.9%; M = 4.08, SD = 0.78), include essential oils, soap bars, and sanitizers (67.0%; M = 3.90, SD = 0.87), are composed of organic ingredients (M = 4.09, SD = 0.80), are infused with wild-crafted

botanicals ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.83$), and are inspired solely by plant-based traditions ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.84$).

Similarly, participants exhibited limited-service knowledge. The majority disagreed or strongly disagreed that the spa services enrich mind, body, and soul (76.3%; $M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.79$), utilize natural resources such as botanicals and stones (74.6%; $M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.80$), or apply ancient medical practice heritage ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.81$). Participants also showed limited knowledge regarding the use of native traditions ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.91$) and examples such as herbal massages and yoga ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.85$).

The findings for operation knowledge similarly reflected knowledge gaps. Most participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that Indigenous-inspired spa guests connect with natural surroundings for spiritual experiences (75.7%; $M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.78$), that greeting rituals are involved ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.89$), or that these spas are categorized as non-luxury ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.92$). Notably, uncertainty was highest regarding the statement that Indigenous-inspired spas should be managed by Indigenous people only, where 31.8% responded neutrally ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.12$). In addition, most disagreed that these operations exclude modern technology ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.91$).

Table 3

Descriptive analysis of knowledge score (K-score)

Item	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Mean Score	SD
<i>Product Knowledge</i>							
The Indigenous-inspired spa products are designed to nurture all skin types.	2 (0.6)	3 (0.8)	74 (20.7)	163 (45.5)	116 (32.4)	4.08	0.78
The Indigenous-inspired spa body products include essential oils, soap bars, and sanitizer.	1 (0.3)	16 (4.5)	101 (28.2)	140 (39.1)	100 (27.9)	3.90	0.87
Products used in the provision of Indigenous-inspired spa treatments are all organic.	2 (0.6)	4 (1.1)	76 (21.2)	152 (42.5)	124 (34.6)	4.09	0.80
The Indigenous-inspired spa products are infused with wild-crafted botanical ingredients.	2 (0.6)	6 (1.7)	101 (28.2)	143 (39.9)	106 (29.6)	3.96	0.83
The Indigenous spa products are inspired by plant-based traditions only.	2 (0.6)	9 (2.5)	93 (26.0)	148 (41.3)	106 (29.6)	3.97	0.84
<i>Service Knowledge</i>							
The service concept of an Indigenous-inspired spa is designed to enrich the mind, body, and soul.	0 (0)	2 (0.6)	83 (23.2)	136 (38.0)	137 (38.3)	4.14	0.79
Indigenous-inspired spas provide wellness treatments that spotlight elements found in natural resources such as botanicals and stones.	2 (0.6)	2 (0.6)	87 (24.3)	151 (42.2)	116 (32.4)	4.05	0.80
Spa services offered in the Indigenous-inspired spa utilize the ancient medical practices heritage.	0 (0)	7 (2.0)	92 (25.7)	142 (39.7)	117 (32.7)	4.03	0.81
The Indigenous-inspired spa treatment and services are not necessarily from native traditions.	3 (0.8)	17 (4.7)	96 (26.8)	136 (38.0)	106 (29.6)	3.91	0.91
Warm herbal massages and traditional yoga are examples of wellness treatments in Indian Indigenous spas.	2 (0.6)	12 (3.4)	94 (26.3)	148 (41.3)	102 (28.5)	3.94	0.85

Table 3 (Continued)

<i>Operation Knowledge</i>							
Indigenous-inspired spa guests connected with the natural surroundings to create a deeper sense of spirituality.	1 (0.3)	3 (0.8)	83 (23.2)	158 (44.1)	113 (31.6)	4.06	0.78
Indigenous-inspired spa protocol involves greeting the client with a traditional ritual at the entrance.	4 (1.1)	11 (3.1)	95 (26.5)	140 (39.1)	108 (30.2)	3.94	0.89
Indigenous-inspired spas cannot be considered luxury spas as they provide treatment featuring local products and traditional healing.	4 (1.1)	19 (5.3)	99 (27.7)	139 (38.8)	97 (27.1)	3.85	0.92
The Indigenous-inspired spa should be managed by Indigenous people only.	19 (5.3)	37 (10.3)	114 (31.8)	103 (28.8)	85 (23.7)	3.55	1.12
Spa operation involved in the Indigenous-inspired spa done without using modern technology.	4 (1.1)	16 (4.5)	104 (29.1)	138 (38.5)	96 (26.8)	3.85	0.91

3.4 Descriptive Analysis of Perception Score (P-Score)

The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the perception score data were normally distributed; therefore, mean P-scores are reported. The participants' perceptions toward Indigenous-inspired spas were assessed through five items using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), with higher mean scores indicating more negative perceptions. Table 4 provides the descriptive analysis of participants' perceptions.

Regarding the affordability of Indigenous-inspired spa treatments, 76.8% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that the prices were reasonable and appropriate ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.80$), and 76.8% also disagreed or strongly disagreed that treatment costs were affordable ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.81$). A similar trend was observed for the perception that receiving treatment at Indigenous-inspired spas can provide relief, where 77.7% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.79$).

In terms of beliefs related to wellness benefits, 74.9% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that Indigenous-inspired spas offer wellness advantages ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.80$), while 77.0% expressed disagreement when asked whether they believe in the overall goodness of such spa treatments ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.76$). Similarly, for the safety of the ingredients used in Indigenous-inspired spa products, 76.8% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that these products are safe and chemical-free ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.78$).

Table 4

Descriptive analysis of perception score (P-score)

Item	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Mean Score	SD
I believe the price of Indigenous-inspired spa treatments is very reasonable and appropriate.	0 (0)	8 (2.2)	75 (20.9)	154 (43.0)	121 (33.8)	4.08	0.80
I believe the Indigenous-inspired spa provides affordable treatment costs.	1 (0.3)	6 (1.7)	76 (21.2)	148 (41.3)	127 (35.5)	4.10	0.81
I believe receiving treatment at the Indigenous-inspired spa can provide relief.	1 (0.3)	6 (1.7)	73 (20.4)	160 (44.7)	118 (33.0)	4.08	0.79

Table 4 (Continued)

I believe in the wellness advantages of an Indigenous-inspired spa.	1 (0.3)	5 (1.4)	84 (23.5)	151 (42.2)	117 (32.7)	4.06	0.80
I believe in the goodness of Indigenous-inspired spa treatments.	1 (0.3)	2 (0.6)	79 (22.1)	167 (46.6)	109 (30.4)	4.06	0.76
I believe the ingredients of Indigenous-inspired spa products are safe and chemical-free.	0 (0)	5 (1.4)	78 (21.8)	151 (42.2)	124 (34.6)	4.10	0.78

3.5 Correlation Analysis

As illustrated in Table 6, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between the participants' knowledge and their perceptions of Indigenous-inspired spas. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

A moderate positive correlation was found between product knowledge and perception, $r = 0.652$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that higher levels of product knowledge were significantly associated with more favorable perceptions of Indigenous-inspired spas. Similarly, a moderate positive correlation was observed between service knowledge and perception, $r = 0.660$, $p < 0.001$, suggesting that participants who demonstrated greater knowledge about the services offered by Indigenous-inspired spas tended to have more positive perceptions.

Conversely, a moderate negative correlation was identified between operation knowledge and perception, $r = -0.511$, $p < 0.001$. This result indicates that as participants' operation knowledge increased, their perception toward Indigenous-inspired spas tended to be less favorable. This inverse relationship may reflect uncertainties or misconceptions among students regarding operational aspects such as management, protocols, and the use of modern technology in Indigenous-inspired spa settings.

Table 6

Pearson correlation between variables

Variables	P-Value	r-value	Strength of correlation
Product knowledge and perception	$<0.001^*$	0.652	Moderate positive correlate
Service knowledge and perception	$<0.001^*$	0.660	Moderate positive correlate
Operation knowledge and perception	$<0.001^*$	-0.511	Moderate negative correlate

* Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

4. Discussions

The present study offers important insights into the knowledge and perception of Indigenous-inspired spas among hospitality, tourism, and wellness entrepreneurship students. The findings demonstrate that while students possess some awareness of Indigenous-inspired spa concepts, their knowledge remains generally limited across product, service, and operational dimensions. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the insufficient integration of Indigenous wellness knowledge within hospitality and tourism education [7].

One of the contributing factors to these knowledge gaps may lie in the nature of students' primary information sources. The majority of participants in this study reported the internet as their main source of knowledge. Reliance on online information may expose students to fragmented or commercialized content rather than authentic, culturally grounded information about Indigenous-inspired spa practices. Previous studies have emphasized that wellness tourism education often focuses on globalized, commercial models while neglecting localized Indigenous knowledge systems

[12,16]. Without structured guidance, students may be exposed to inaccurate portrayals of Indigenous healing traditions, contributing to widespread misconceptions regarding product composition, service philosophy, and operational protocols [13,17].

The positive associations observed between product and service knowledge with perception support previous findings that enhanced knowledge fosters more favourable attitudes toward Indigenous wellness offerings [1]. As students deepen their understanding of product ingredients, healing modalities, and cultural authenticity, their perceptions of Indigenous-inspired spas become more positive. This reinforces the importance of incorporating authentic case studies, field-based learning, and cultural immersion into hospitality and wellness programs.

In contrast, the negative association found between operation knowledge and perception indicates that students who are exposed to more detailed operational and cultural aspects of Indigenous inspired spas, such as traditional ownership structures, spiritual practices, and minimal reliance on modern technology, may experience confusion or discomfort when processing this information [10,15]. This discomfort may stem from their limited cultural sensitivity, which makes it challenging for them to reconcile Indigenous operational models with the business-oriented frameworks emphasized in their academic training. Therefore, there is a critical need to integrate intercultural competence development into hospitality, tourism, and wellness education to equip students with the skills and ethical understanding necessary for responsible engagement with Indigenous communities [4].

Ultimately, these findings reflect broader challenges in balancing commercial tourism development with cultural preservation and Indigenous knowledge systems. Without adequate educational interventions, future wellness tourism entrepreneurs may inadvertently perpetuate misconceptions or exploit Indigenous traditions without respecting their cultural integrity [5]. Strengthening Indigenous content within hospitality and wellness curricula will not only address these gaps but also contribute to Malaysia's positioning as a leader in culturally authentic and sustainable wellness tourism [4].

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed a substantial gap between the limited knowledge and the generally unfavourable perceptions held by hospitality, tourism, and wellness entrepreneurship students regarding Indigenous inspired spas. While product and service knowledge were moderately associated with more positive perceptions, limited understanding of operational aspects was linked to more negative perceptions, suggesting that unfamiliarity with cultural and management practices may contribute to cognitive discomfort. These findings highlight the urgent need to incorporate comprehensive Indigenous wellness content, including product, service, and operational knowledge, into hospitality, tourism, and wellness education. Strengthening cultural competence and operational understanding will be essential to prepare future wellness entrepreneurs for responsible and sustainable engagement with Malaysia's Indigenous wellness tourism sector.

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