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Decent or dirty work? Revealing the complexities of employment in wellness tourism

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ABSTRACT

Wellness tourism represents a growing international trend for health-conscious consumers seeking to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. It is also a multi-billion-dollar industry that supports workers and communities. Despite this, wellness tourism work can be viewed as a more extreme form of tourism work due to its gendered, sexualised and emotionally intensive nature. Of significance to the current study, the lived working experiences of those delivering wellness tourism is an under-researched topic, lacking in theoretically grounded explanations. Following a narrative review of the limited extant literature, informed by the lenses of dirty work and dignity at work, this paper proposes a conceptual model for transitioning wellness tourism work from dirty to decent as a means of realising Sustainable Development Goal 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth. Contested areas, compatibilities, and research opportunities are explored along the way to providing a roadmap for this workforce, illustrating how to assign a sense of dignity using a tri-level agenda across macro, meso and micro levels. We conclude by proposing future research and practical directions that aim to ensure that wellness tourism work offers decent work for all.

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Introduction

Wellness tourism is an established global movement for health-conscious travellers looking to proactively improve their wellbeing. It is identified as one of the world's fastest-growing tourism market segments (Global Wellness Institute, 2021). This is attributed to the significantly higher spending of wellness travellers per trip relative to other travel markets (Stará & Peterson, 2017). In pursuit of wellness as a 'state of health featuring the harmony of body, mind and spirit' (Müller & Kaufmann, 2001, p. 6), wellness tourism can be seen as a growing subset of the broader field of health tourism (Smith & Puczkó, 2008).

Wellness tourism has been generally examined from the consumer (Huang et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2016; Pesonen et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2022) and destination (Bočkus et al., 2021; Heung & Kucukusta, 2013; Kucukusta & Heung, 2012; Sunanta, 2020) perspectives. Whilst health tourism, as an overarching concept, includes medical tourism (people travelling for a health-related cure or treatment), wellness tourism, as Smith and Puczkó (2008, p. 40) note, is 'more preventative than curative'. Müller and Kaufmann (2001, p. 7) provided an early and much-cited definition of wellness tourism as 'the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey and residence by people whose main motive is to preserve or promote their health'. In distinguishing between health and wellness tourism, Lehto and Lehto (2019) suggest that wellness tourism is a more universal approach that is focused on self-care and general wellbeing improvements. Wellness tourism experiences, of course, can be confined to a wide range of other tourist activities that have little to do with wellness, and indeed, along these lines, Lehto and Lehto (2019, p. 937) suggest that 'a vacation product, in essence, should be conceptualised as a wellness product'. While spa tourism has been highlighted as the most popular form of wellness tourism (Chen et al., 2013), the phenomenon of wellness tourism remains subjective and prone to varying cultural and organisational interpretations, with key terminologies such as health tourism and wellness tourism often used interchangeably (Kemppainen et al., 2021).

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The purpose or *raison d'etre* of wellness tourism has metamorphosised from a narrow focus on physical and recuperative wellbeing to a much broader and more comprehensive interpretation that includes mental wellbeing and the psychic and spiritual realm (Dini & Pencarelli, 2022; Sirgy, 2019). The emphasis on wellness in this sector attempts to achieve a sustainable equilibrium between the economy, people, and the environment by promoting the wellbeing of local communities, tourists, and employees (Alexis-Thomas, 2020). However, with the rise of the 'gig economy' (Tan et al., 2021, p.1), the global wellness workforce has substantially increased temporary employment and contract work (Global Wellness Institute, 2021). This has led to a growing proportion of the wellness workforce experiencing jobs that lack job security, offer irregular working hours, and unstable incomes, among other stressors, in alignment with broader tourism and hospitality sectors (Robinson et al., 2019). As a result, employees in the wellness field may be asked to de-stress and revitalise their clients (Damijanic, 2019) while neglecting their own wellbeing (Global Wellness Institute, 2021).

Against this backdrop, there is a lack of inclusive studies about wellness tourism employees and their workforce experiences (Baum & Lockstone-Binney, 2014; Frost et al., 2021). This is somewhat surprising given the prominence of wellness offerings in the tourism portfolio worldwide and the size of its workforce, relative to the long tradition of research on the antecedents and outcomes of employee wellbeing more broadly (for example, Faragher et al., 2005; Gordon & Adler, 2017; Scholarios et al., 2017; Taris & Schreurs, 2009). Additionally, the more recent push towards Sustainable Human Resource Management (Baum, 2018; Baum et al., 2016) speaks to holistic considerations for managing employee wellbeing.

The current study seeks to spotlight and conceptualise wellness tourism work by conducting a narrative review of the associated limited literature to provide critical insight into the working conditions of employees in wellness tourism. Wellness work can, substantially, be located at the heart of discourse that addresses the commodification of the human body (McDowell, 2011) and issues of gender, power, exploitation, and degradation that emanate from this conceptualisation. As such, employing the dirty work lens and its counterpoint in the dignity of work literature, this conceptual paper highlights the contested nature and realities of ensuring employee dignity and respect while aspiring to provide work that is 'safe, fair, productive, and meaningful in conditions of freedom' (Winchenbach et al., 2019, p. 1027) aligned to the aspirations of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 'Decent Work and Economic Growth'. In developing a conceptual model for transitioning wellness tourism work from dirty to decent, our findings can have value for businesses and destinations and inform policy arguments for decent and responsible work within the sector. We proceed from here to outline the narrative review method and search strategy underpinning this conceptual paper.

Narrative review

With the aim of providing critical insight into the working conditions of employees in wellness tourism, a narrative literature review was conducted to develop, interpret and critique the phenomenon of wellness tourism work. Narrative reviews are appropriate for synthesising research evidence to '(i) incorporate a broad range of knowledge sources and strategies for knowing and (ii) undertake multi-level interpretation using creativity and judgement' (Greenhalgh et al. 2018, p. 2). This type of review can also underpin the development of conceptual frameworks (Cronin et al., 2008). Narrative reviews are guided by the judgement of the reviewer in the selection of information (Greenhalgh et al., 2018) and informed by their expertise in making interpretations or connections between the topics covered (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The review should be led by the emerging evidence (Baumeister & Leary, 1997) as distinct from the quantifiable approach of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), which requires detailed technical search and inclusion/exclusion protocols apriori. Greenhalgh et al. (2018, p. 4) caution against conflating SLRs with 'superior quality' and narrative reviews with 'inferior quality' and argue both approaches, whilst different, should be viewed as yielding complementary insights.

The three tourism workforce experts comprising the research team undertook preliminary readings of key works to select appropriate terminology (Müller & Kaufmann, 2001; Pesonen et al., 2011; Smith & Puczkó, 2008) and to assess current understandings of wellness tourism work. Based on this preliminary work, the search terms 'wellness tourism', 'health tourism' and 'spa tourism' were adopted in combination with the following workforce descriptors: 'work', 'worker', 'workforce', 'employee' and 'staff'. 'Medical tourism' was deliberately excluded from the search terms as the expert team considered papers aligned to this term might skew the search returns to focus on the specialised medical workforce (i.e. doctors and nurses). Additionally, noting the lenses the expert team saw merit in adopting to conceptualise wellness tourism work based on the preliminary readings, namely, decent work, dignity at work, dirty work and SDG 8,

these terms were also searched for in combination with 'wellness tourism', 'health tourism', 'spa tourism', and 'tourism' and 'hospitality' more generally. No specific time parameters were applied to the search process in terms of date of publication. Using these terms, the search was conducted during May and June 2022. One researcher from the team conducted the search using these terms, and a second researcher cross-checked the results as the search progressed, i.e. a sample of the same search terms was applied by the second researcher, and the results were compared and discussed in the event of any inconsistencies.

Relevant academic literature from key research databases such as EBSCO was searched via an institutional library catalogue, and Google Scholar was also searched to provide comprehensive coverage. Finally, with the goal of selecting only those articles that would be truly informative to the narrative literature review (Greenhalgh et al., 2018), all three experts evaluated the scope of each paper. In particular, the abstracts and keywords were reviewed, with irrelevant studies discarded from further consideration.

As with all studies, our conceptual paper has limitations. Legitimately, narrative reviews face criticisms for cherry picking the literature (Greenhalgh et al., 2018, p. 4), however this weighed against the expert judgement of the researchers in selecting sources, critiquing the literature and making connections between the disparate topics and research areas. Furthermore, the search strategy applied focused on English language publications only given this was the shared language of the expert team. As such, if valuable sources published in other languages existed, these were excluded from the review.

Literature review

Based on this narrative review approach, the literature reviewed explores the current understanding of wellness tourism work before moving on to examine the phenomenon through the specific lenses of dirty work and dignity at work. Finally, the extent to which wellness tourism work may be considered as decent work is critiqued in respect of achieving SDG 8.

Working in wellness tourism

The tourism and hospitality industries continue to be predominantly low-paying, precarious with the workforce dominated by ethnic minorities, immigrants, and females (Booyens et al., 2022; Yıldırım, 2021). This status is by no means organic; rather, it is the result of historical and organisational mechanisms that have situated employees of specific groups in a highly fragmented workplace (Dudley et al., 2022).

The literature reveals that wellness work shares characteristics in common with the broader tourism and hospitality workforce in terms of *precariousness*, low pay, challenging working conditions, abusive environments and over-representation of disadvantaged and marginalised communities in the workforce (Baum & Lockstone-Binney, 2014). The nature of the work also leads to issues of *gender stereotyping* that describe wellness as women's work (Wisnom & Gallagher, 2018). Diversity issues are also significant. Smith and Puczkó (2008, p. 155) highlight the 'resource-intensive' nature of the sector and various challenges, including bringing staff into local economies to service wellness tourism developments, particularly in areas where there is a limited workforce or where the host community does not have the necessary skills to provide guests with specialised or quality care. This may lead to wage disparities between migrants and local staff.

Baum and Lockstone-Binney (2014) highlight the diversity of contexts within which 'wellness work' is located. They also point to the challenges inherent in classifying work and workers in wellness tourism, noting that they include work areas

> that relate to specific wellness functions in the delivery of therapeutic, fitness, dietary and spiritual services; generalised wellness/ health/ medical areas where there is overlap with related fields; tourism-specific functions that are also offered within other areas of travel and tourism services; general support roles found across a range of business sectors; and general management functions for which no specific wellness attributes are essential. (p. 133)

This diversity of roles brings with it differing training and skills requirements that include varied approaches to regulation, professional accreditation/ certifications, qualifications, and career paths; and a wide range of workplace contexts in which roles are exercised, reflecting the fragmented nature of the industry in terms of services offered (Müller & Kaufmann, 2001). For instance, most of the industry offerings are regulated in patchy ways (Global Wellness Institute, 2021), with short-term accreditations that lack in-depth monitoring and a standardised training system (Dutt, 2022). Further, in a recent study conducted by Perera et al. (2022), employees in the wellness sector indicated that vocational training was their foremost unmet need, in addition to enhanced soft skills and social recognition.

The socio-cultural and economic context in which the work takes place is crucial including interaction with consumers (the wellness tourists) who are culturally

and economically heterogeneous in terms of their expectations and service requirements. The amalgam of technical, social, *aesthetic, and emotional skills* that combine to deliver wellness experiences to tourists is recognised as exportable in the form of a wellness migrant workforce, primarily from Global South countries such as Thailand to affluent consumer societies of the Global North (Sunanta, 2020).

Research exploring the lived experience of wellness tourism workers is limited. Two recent reviews of the health and wellness tourism and travel literature continued to note the predominance of customer and destination-focused studies on wellness tourism over the periods 2010–2018 (Kemppainen et al., 2021) and 1970–2020 (Zhong et al., 2021). Both studies highlight that this body of literature is theoretically underdeveloped. It is also largely silent as to the treatment of the wellness tourism workforce, except for understanding how it can facilitate the service experience in order to meet customer expectations. It is, therefore, timely for a conceptual exploration of wellness tourism work that draws upon a novel frame and for the purposes of this work, we adopt the lenses of dirty work and dignity at work.

Wellness tourism work: through the lenses of dirty work and dignity at work

A prominent definition of dirty work in the extant literature is a job that is physically repulsive and demeaning to one's dignity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), recognising that dimensions of such interpretation may be socially and culturally framed. Human identity is shaped in part by one's occupation, which serves as a source of social standing (Davis, 1984). As a result, employees in jobs deemed to be dirty encounter difficulties in developing an esteem-enhancing identity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Dirty work reflects a low-status role, as well as a lack of respect and dignity for one's job (Frost et al., 2021). The commonality among such jobs is the worker's 'visceral repugnance' of it, irrespective of the real aspects of the job itself (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 415). Inequality brought about by inferior positions can have a negative impact on a worker's dignity (Sayer, 2007b), which has become a key concern of workforce research (Bal & Jong, 2017; Baum et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Robinson & Baum, 2020). Specifically, there has been growing research interest in understanding dirty work because employees' wellness and job satisfaction are dependent on their dignity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Deery et al., 2019; Frost et al., 2021). Therefore, in a low-wage, socially stigmatised occupation like wellness tourism, realising dignity at work is difficult.

Further, employees can become 'unwell' because of stressful working conditions generated by the aggressive and unpredictable competitive environment in which wellness tourism businesses operate, as well as by the stress brought on by drastic changes in social structure and work-life balance (Abe et al., 2016). As covered in the previous section, the wellness industry is highly stressful due to its labour-intensive nature, which involves intensive shifts, heavy workloads, anti-social work schedules, and frequent physical and emotional contact with customers (Global Wellness Institute, 2021; Yürcü & Çolakoğlu, 2020). Yürcü and Çolakoğlu (2020) further elaborate that staff who are unable to energise themselves suffer emotionally and physically. Some studies refer to this workforce as being 'invisible' in addition to being undervalued. Ironically, staff in the wellness industry will be frequently required to de-stress and revitalise their clients, keeping others healthy while neglecting their own well-being (Global Wellness Institute, 2021).

Several drivers frame the wellness tourism workforce as an extreme and more precarious form of tourism work compared to other front-facing tourism settings (Baum & Lockstone-Binney, 2014). In particular, the role of workers in wellness tourism entails elevated *emotional requirements*, in many ways connected to *gender*, *sexuality* and *intimacy* concerns (Smith & Puczkó, 2008). A recent study, and one of the few to investigate the experiences of wellness tourism workers, found that workers in spa settings may view their employment as comparable to prostitution in the way it is perceived (Frost et al., 2021). If not at that extreme, delivering wellness services can place a greater burden on workers to generate positive emotional responses for their clients (e.g. being cheerful, relaxed, inspired, etc.), which research has suggested contributes to wellness customer loyalty (Huang et al., 2019). Engendering these emotional responses for a personalised and tailored service experience can be more problematic when customer expectations are high, as in the case of wellness tourism (Smith et al., 2020). This can be augmented by the *potential for abuse* by tourists and fellow workers, issues that appear to have been exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Boukis et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2020). These characteristics create vulnerabilities in the wellness tourism workforce, making decent and dignified working conditions challenging to achieve in many wellness industry contexts, particularly in the Global South.

The question of ethics also relates to wellness tourism workers who need to engage in highly interactive *physical work*, placing both the workforce and their customers in potentially ambiguous and difficult situations. The boundaries between wellness and sex tourism

may be blurred in the eyes of the consumer and maybe even those of the worker and management (Baum & Lockstone-Binney, 2014), particularly when it takes place in intimate settings, behind closed doors, giving rise to *surveillance concerns* (Frost et al., 2021). Furthermore, in what is the first association to our knowledge of 'dirty work' with wellness tourism, Frost et al. (2021) labelled spa therapy services work using the term in consideration of the blurred line between sex and spa work. In concluding their study, the authors note that 'there is also scope to focus more research attention on the stigmatisation of spa work as "dirty work" and morally tainted and how this affects spa therapists both in and outside the workplace' (Frost et al., 2021, p. 16). This gap opens up new avenues for conceptualisation using the frames of dirty work and dignity at work and the attainment of decency across the wellness tourism workforce.

As a counter to dirty work, scholars are increasingly interested in the concept of dignity at work (May & Daly, 2020; Winchenbach, 2022). Dignity refers to the intrinsic humanity of every individual and can be viewed as a fundamental universal concept that assumes every human being has equal value (Daly & May, 2016). Dignity has been recognised in a myriad of international and regional frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and the SDGs (UNGA, 2015), among others. This reflects its essential relevance as a thread that binds together essential human rights (May & Daly, 2020; Winchenbach, 2022).

Dignity can be viewed not only as something that individuals hold by virtue of their shared humanity but also in relation to one's treatment by others (Bolton, 2010; Winchenbach et al., 2019). Therefore, the major risk is that dignity is integrally rooted in human identity and presence, including the worth or social position of beings within the dominant ideology at the time (Winchenbach, 2022). According to Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2003) model of relational perception, people take signals from others regarding the significance they place on their value and being, including their work. Consequently, one's profession, for instance, seems to have become a crucial component of pride and respect, significantly influencing dignity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Dignity is crucial for employees' wellbeing and job satisfaction (Sayer, 2007a), which in turn influences organisational success (Hodson & Roscigno, 2004). Recognition, esteem, pride, worth, and status are all positive emotions and conditions affiliated with dignity (Sayer, 2007b). The dignity at work literature is mainly based on shared moral values by leveraging notions such as respect, self-respect, acknowledgement, and humanity, as well as the implementation of non-exploitative employment conditions (Winchenbach, 2022). In its broadest context, dignity at work involves *upholding vital individual rights* (Khademi et al., 2012). Kateb (2014), for example, elaborates that people ultimately want to be treated as unique individuals since treating them otherwise would violate their dignity. Sayer (2007b) associates dignity with treating each person individually, at least to some extent, and not simply as an instrument or an alternative for others. Bal (2017) concurs with this view and adds that individuals are demeaned when they get treated solely as a means to an end without distinguishing their *unique traits and talents*.

The review highlights various ways of valuing dignity at work, including providing fair employment and circumstances that respect individuals' intrinsic human worth (Lucas, 2017; Nimri et al., 2020). Reasonable compensation and stable work terms in a safe environment can be considered some of the essential aspects of dignity at work (Bolton, 2010). *Fair working conditions* are essential for dignity as they tangibly and metaphorically acknowledge workers as more than replaceable objects (Bolton, 2010; Nimri et al., 2020). On the other side of the spectrum, there are various ways to deny or undermine the dignity of others. For example, workers doing dirty tasks may undergo reification, in which they are seen as interchangeable and disposable items rather than humans (Lucas, 2017) or, indeed, in the wellness tourism context, part of an invisible workforce in the eyes of their clients (Leonard, 1998).

In essence, irrespective of their position in the hierarchical system, workers prefer to work in a well-functioning institution that recognises their dignity and worth (Hodson, 2002; Sayer, 2007b). Workers in the wellness tourism industry regularly engage in *servile interactions* with management, co-workers, and customers as part of their job, and it has been demonstrated that such actions impact upon an individual's sense of dignity and self-respect (Hodson & Roscigno, 2004; Frost et al., 2021). A lack of respect at work causes discontent that affects motivation and productivity, as well as absenteeism, turnover, and tension that results in poor customer service (Hsieh et al., 2016; Khademi et al., 2012; Nimri et al., 2021). Although there is substantial literature on dignity at work, little emphasis has been given to the dignity of workers in wellness tourism settings to ensure their wellbeing, create decent employment, and promote sustainable growth in this industry (Frost et al., 2021). An avenue for achieving this ambition may be through the lens of SDG 8.

The wellness tourism workforce and SDG 8

In 2015, the United Nations (UNDP, 2022) introduced 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' among 17 SDGs

framed as aspirational, universal goals to be achieved by 2030 (Alexis-Thomas, 2020). SDG 8 is pivotal in promoting sustainable economic growth, full employment, and decent working conditions worldwide (UNDP, 2022).

The 2030 Agenda has been instrumental in driving sustainable development, integrating economic, social, and environmental pillars, and offering a framework to address pressing global challenges. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has been at the forefront, ensuring that decent work remains a central goal within this agenda (ILO, 2017). Simultaneously, policymakers and academics have long argued about how to define decent work, its relevance to a fair and equitable society, and whether there is any real progress towards achieving decent employment for all (Bolton & Laaser, 2020). Regrettably, despite this focus, the achievement of decent work across the globe, and specifically within the tourism industry, remains inconsistent, with many regions lagging in providing equitable employment opportunities (Fredman & Du Toit, 2019)

In the context of wellness tourism, the compatibility of SDG 8's decent work criteria is highly contested and the basis for much debate (UNGA, 2015). Baum and Nguyen (2019) demonstrate how tourism employment impinges human rights at the individual, within family and community levels, indicating a significant misalignment with stated ILO's commitments to decent work. This concern is supported by Robinson et al. (2019), who argue that the individual and workforce aspects of sustainability are often overlooked in tourism research and policy. As a result, it is argued that employment in tourism violates human rights and is fundamentally incompatible with the nexus of wellness and decent work (Baum & Nguyen, 2019; Bianchi & de Man, 2021; Dwyer, 2022; Lockstone-Binney & Ong, 2021; Robinson et al., 2019). Baum (2018) also notes the exclusion of workforce issues in discussions on sustainable tourism despite the sector's prominence in the 2030 Agenda.

These discussions focus on the nature of tourism (and, specifically, wellness) employment and how it can be precarious, with high employee turnover rates, socially challenging work schedules, and low salaries, among many other drawbacks (Lockstone-Binney & Ong, 2021). As previously argued in this paper, as an extreme form of tourism employment, it may be questioned as to whether the realisation of SDG 8 for wellness tourism workers is realistically attainable. Reconciling such work with the aspirations of universal 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' is difficult, and this paper seeks to identify the potential contribution of future research in this regard and practical implications for promoting decent wellness work.

Discussion

Conducting a narrative review of the extant literature on wellness tourism work and adopting the conceptualisation of 'dirty work' and 'dignity at work', this paper explores the merits of wellness tourism work in contributing towards Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. The exploration of these elements within the wellness tourism sector sheds light on the disturbing experiences of workers, whose narratives often reveal the complexity of maintaining dignity in a field characterised by varied and challenging working conditions. The review revealed elements of dirty wellness work included its precariousness and gendered nature, requiring taxing emotional, aesthetic and physical requirements, with surveillance concerns arising due to the intimate settings the work takes place in, potentially allowing scope for abuse or to a lesser degree, workers experiencing demeaning servile interactions.

The findings of the expert analysis highlights the gap between the idealistic aim of decent work and the reality within the wellness tourism sector. An assessment of the contemporary picture of decent work via the lens of human dignity finds that SDG 8 does not well represent the realities of the workforce in wellness tourism and that progress towards attaining decent employment is some way off (Fredman & Du Toit, 2019). This is disappointing with SDG 8 offering the visibility and momentum of a universal framework for sustainable development to drive meaningful change (UNGA, 2015). The fulfilment of decent work however remains contingent on the functioning of a capitalist economy, which prioritises adaptability, limited social security, and a constant push to drive profitability and shareholder value by means that inevitably require getting more for less from the workforce (Bolton & Laaser, 2020). This discrepancy between the ideal and the real underscores the urgent need for a re-evaluation of the structures and systems that govern work in the wellness tourism sector, advocating for a shift towards more equitable and dignified employment practices. This shift might include advocating for better regulatory frameworks that enforce fair labour practices, promoting transparency, improving job security, and ensuring appropriate compensation and professional recognition that reflects the unique skills and contributions of wellness tourism workers.

In this paper, we positioned work in wellness tourism as an under-researched area, lacking the

conceptual coherence that a guiding framework can provide to interpret fragmented and, at times, contradictory evidence from extant studies. Interrogating this evidence relative to SDG 8 and decent work led us to consider imperatives relating to dirty work and human dignity as the conceptual bases for our discussion. Our analysis, heretofore, leads us to propose a conceptual model (see Figure 1) that positions dirty work at one extreme of the spectrum and decent work at the other (Blustein et al., 2016). Wellness tourism work as a means of transitioning from dirty to decent work positions dignity at work at the heart of this transition, operating from top-down and bottom-up across three levels: the micro, meso and macro. In other words, decent work, along with long-term sustainable development and multiple pressures emerging in the wellness tourism market, is contingent on the initiatives carried out by stakeholders at each level to protect the rights of this relatively underrepresented, voiceless, and invisible workforce. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of dynamics at play, providing a clear agenda for addressing the challenges encountered by workers in this sector. By illustrating the transition from dirty work to decent work, the figure serves as a guiding tool, highlighting the necessity for systemic change and assisting stakeholders in their efforts to enhance working conditions in support of realising SDG 8.

Micro level

As informed by the dignity lens, at the micro level of the individual, their self-perception in relation to their self-worth, pride, value, and status are positive concepts linked to dignity. In wellness tourism, workers often face challenging conditions yet maintain dignity by valuing their roles and keeping a positive perspective towards their employement. This aligns with the principles of decent work, advocating autonomy and self-regulation as key to dignity in the workplace (Sayer, 2007a). Workers enhance their sense of self worth through positive self-appraisals of their tasks, which occur both subconsciously and continuously, thus fostering job satisfaction and aligning with the decent work agenda (Nimri et al., 2021). Additionally, by embracing and reinterpreting the stigmas associated with their roles, these employees highlight the importance of their contributions.

This level underscores the importance of psychological empowerment that nurtures individual dignity. This can afford workers dignity in work seen to be menial through their self-perceptions, disposition, skills, and affective domain qualities. Furthermore, possessing a sense of personal fulfilment from work provides job satisfaction (Sayer, 2007a), which, according to research, facilitates high work standards and quality customer experiences (Mooney et al., 2016). An illustrative example can be seen in the work of spa therapists who, despite the physical demands and sometimes marginalised status within the healthcare continuum, focus on the therapeutic value they provide to their customers (Suttikun et al., 2018). Therefore, by reframing their role to emphasise the holistic health benefits they provide, such as stress reduction and health support, these professionals elevate the internal fulfilment and perceived value of their work (Suttikun et al., 2018).

Transitioning wellness work from dirty to decent however requires more than a stand-alone micro response, i.e. it should not be left at the level of the individual employee to singlehandedly make this transition without meso and macro supports.

Meso level

At the meso level, interactions between and among individuals generate dignity (Jacobson, 2009). Respect conveyed in workplace settings can be interpreted as dignity. Respect is a crucial element in most definitions of dignity. Sayer (2007a), for example, claims that people's experiences of dignity are based on 'words and deeds'. He further elaborates on recognising the individual as 'someone who is more than what they do for a living, who demands respect simply as a person' (Sayer, 2007a, pp. 572–573). Creating a culture of inclusivity and diversity at this level is essential, where all employees feel valued and respected regardless of their role or background.

This respectful interaction requires multiple parties, including interactions between bosses and their subordinates, co-workers, employees, and clients/customers. For instance, if employees find themselves as mere instruments producing revenue for their employers, this will erode their dignity (Sayer, 2007a). Therefore, management's routine acknowledgment of the work and expertise of wellness tourism workers could enhance their sense of worth and belonging (Nimri et al., 2024). In the same vein, wellness employees may feel violated in their dignity when they perceive their invisibility to customers since this leads to feelings of social inferiority. Therefore, clients who treat workers with courtesy and professionalism can help to foster and reinforce a sense of dignity for workers through these positive social interactions, underscoring the integral role of workers within the wellness framework. Some customers may be encouraged by the widespread

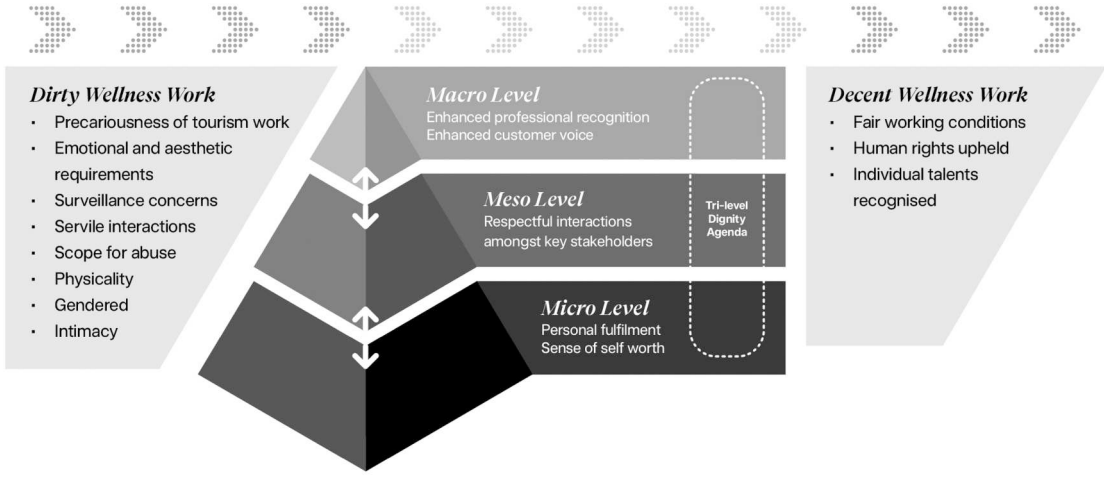

Figure 1. Conceptual model for transitioning wellness tourism work from 'dirty' to 'decent' work aligned to SDG 8.

'the customer is always right' rhetoric to treat service employees disrespectfully and insensitively (Nimri et al., 2024). When organisations internalise this dialogue by denying employees' protection against such threats, the discourse can have a negative impact on the dignity of wellness service workers (Lucas, 2017). Therefore, promoting open communication is crucial for creating a respectful and dignified work environment while also considering the role and impact of all players in this equation, including customers.

Macro level

At the macro level, socially imposed concepts such as job role, profession, and social identity have a significant, albeit indirect, impact on achieving dignity at work by influencing the larger communicatively constructed context in which work is situated (Lucas, 2017). Conversations about the reputation of professions can affect how jobs are valued. For instance, notions that classify some occupations as 'dirty' devalue the social standing affiliated with those occupations and may even ostracise those who hold these positions. Wellness tourism work, in most countries, lacks professional recognition and qualifications that give status to such jobs (Baum & Lockstone-Binney, 2014). Consequently, wellness work often suffers from a lack of esteem, being perceived as dirty and undignified. Achieving meaningful progress in elevating the status of this work may be best accomplished at the macro level, given the SDG framework's limited emphasis on individual accountability (Bexell & Jönsson, 2017).

Efforts to dignify wellness work should begin by engaging governments, industry stakeholders and consumer voices in initiatives aimed at professionalising the sector and granting professional recognition to its qualifications frameworks. A constructive step might include the establishment of a national accreditation system for wellness professionals, which could standardise training and operational protocols, similar to those in healthcare. Also, creating partnerships between the wellness tourism industry and educational institutions can facilitate the development of accredited training programmes, which can enhance the sector's professional standing. Additionally, public awareness campaigns can play a crucial role in reshaping societal perceptions of wellness work, highlighting its value in holistic and preventative health and its economic significance.

The consumer's voice is of particular significance here because unless users advocate for and accord dignity and value to wellness work and seek to enhance its professional status, it is unlikely that other stakeholders, including governments, will pursue this outcome. This underscores the importance of fostering a culture of respect and appreciation for wellness workers among the general public. For instance, a targeted media campaign could highlight the extensive training and specialised skills required in wellness professions, similar to successful efforts that have raised the professional stature of nurses and teachers. This would aim to enhance public understanding and respect for wellness workers. The corollary of this is that if individuals (customers) are not actively involved in SDG realisation (decent work for wellness tourism workers), the status quo is likely to persist, with wellness employees finding themselves independently seeking ways to achieve a sense of dignity in their work (Kensbock et al., 2016). Therefore, it is imperative that all stakeholders are engaged and committed to the collective goal of promoting decent work and worker dignity within the wellness tourism sector.

Conclusions: a future research agenda

The exploration of wellness tourism work in this study addresses a notable gap in the literature, as research on the lived experiences of wellness tourism workers is lacking (Frost et al., 2021). Recent reviews of wellness tourism literature have underscored the predominance of studies focused on customers and destinations, with limited attention given to the workforce and a lack of theoretical development (Kemppainen et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2021). In response, our study adopts the lenses of 'dirty work' and 'dignity at work' to provide a conceptual exploration of wellness tourism work. Our proposed model (Figure 1) offers a tri-level agenda that extends the application of these concepts beyond isolated treatment at any one level (macro, meso and micro). This model enriches theoretical discussions by incorporating the specific dynamics of wellness tourism as an extreme form of tourism work, thereby providing a deeper understanding of dirty and decent workin this context. Additionally, our discussion underscores the importance of considering the interplay between individual, interpersonal, and societal factors in achieving decent work and dignity at work. This holistic perspective aligns with and extends the theoretical underpinnings of SDG 8, advocating for a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to achieving decent work in the wellness tourism sector.

We propose a focused agenda for future research interventions that address dignity and decent work in the wellness tourism sector, guided by the aspirational reference point of SDG 8. Such research interventions should leverage the tri-level analysis presented in Figure 1, informing policy development at the macro level and engaging in understanding the lived experiences of actors and agents at the micro and meso levels. Given the relative neglect of worker dignity in wellness tourism research, studies that explore the dignity of wellness tourism workers at both micro and meso levels are needed (Frost et al., 2021). Specifically, the complex dynamics between workers and customers warrant further investigation and these may be discerned using ethnographic methods that seek to embed the researcher in the wellness tourism context, documenting experiences over time. Customers have a significant impact on workers' dignity, both in terms of how workers are perceived within the industry (meso level) and through interactions that undermine workers' self-image (micro level) (Kensbock et al., 2016). This argument challenges the view of customers as passive agents within the 'organisational context' of tourism employment (Winchenbach et al., 2019) highlighting the need to explore their active role in shaping the dignity of workers. Qualitative designs could be applied to provide grounded insights on this exploratory topic.

By examining how employee agency and self-confidence can be enhanced, as alongside promoting customer responsibility and respect for others, researchers can contribute to a better understanding of the co-creational process that underpins dignity in this sector. A participatory action research (PAR) approach could be used to facilitate the co-creation process and ensure in-depth insights are captured on the lived experience of employees and customers. Such research has the potential to advance realisation of SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, by highlighting the importance of dignity and sustainable development as interconnected concepts (Winchenbach et al., 2019).

Based on our conceptual framework, we propose three key areas for interventions that can directly impact the dignity and decent work of wellness tourism workers, as illuminated in Figure 1.

A role for policy intervention – macro level

Research at the macro level can inform policymakers, tourism industry organisations/ associations, education and training agencies about the working conditions of this relatively marginalised workforce. A broader understanding of employment concerns in wellness work is crucial (Baum et al., 2016). Furthermore, enhancing the professionalism of the sector through education, training and certification can significantly improve the working lives of wellness tourism workers. Research that builds the case for these initiatives would be of real value.

In pursuing this line, regulation plays a pivotal role. Occupation regulation, involving qualification requirements and standards, can protect workers' conditions and wages from the unpredictability of market competition by establishing their status as 'skilled' or 'professional' (Lloyd & Payne, 2018). Further, offering training and recognised certifications would provide direct benefits to workers in this industry, such as increased job opportunities and greater earning capacity, all of which can contribute to their wellbeing (Dwyer, 2022; Helliwell et al., 2020). Further, enhancing education and skill development can aid workers in job retention, promotion, increased pay, and job satisfaction (Cazes et al., 2015) – all indicative of 'decent work' (SDG 8) (Maccagnan et al., 2019).

Consumers' recognition – meso level

A better understanding of the working lives and experiences of employees in wellness tourism can provide positive opportunities to establish dignity and decent

work. Cooley's (1922) 'looking glass analogy' describes how our preconceptions of how others perceive our image, behaviour, or standing, influence the self. Therefore, the self is a mental image of 'the self to the self' in a collective portrait construction that serves as an impulse to guide behaviour. A lack of respect, recognition, and acknowledgement can strip workers of dignity in wellness tourism. Specifically, feelings of inequity due to consumers' perceptions can disclose social cognitive prejudices and disruption through status comparisons and non-acknowledgement (Nimri et al., 2020). As some workers may perceive their employment as being compared to prostitution (Frost et al., 2021), customers should recognise the value and necessity of wellness work by acknowledging the people who provide these often intimate, physically demanding and emotionally exhausting services. This may lead to a virtuous circle as dignified work has been found to positively influence customer satisfaction (Mooney et al., 2016).

Employee welfare and stability – micro level

The availability, quality, and wage levels of jobs affect material wellbeing as well as outcomes such as self-esteem and personal dignity. Operators in wellness tourism could boost employees' wellbeing and offer decent work, considering the evidence of a substantial positive correlation between employee wellbeing and staff productivity and work satisfaction (Global Happiness Council, 2018; Dwyer, 2022). Research challenging the common model of 'on demand' service contracts for wellness workers, which parallel those common in the gig economy, can lead to outcomes that facilitate greater dignity and security in work in the sector.

Understanding the connection between maintaining a healthy work-life balance, which includes adequate leisure, personal care, and family time for wellness tourism workers, and its impact on their mental and physical health, is crucial. The workplace physical and emotional atmosphere is linked to employee satisfaction and personal recognition (Winchenbach et al., 2019). Work-life conflicts, on the other hand, can indeed be challenging and alienating for workers (OECD, 2020). In wellness tourism, the option of a proper work balance is heavily influenced by the availability of decent work.

As a final note, while aspirations for dignity and decent work in industries such as wellness tourism are widespread, reality often fails to deliver on noble intent. Therefore, tangible outcomes must be achieved from commitments by wellness tourism industry stakeholders to enhance the working lives of wellness tourism workers, alongside improving the way that workers are perceived by others (consumers, their management, their communities). Failure to deliver will expose these words (as has been the case with respect to other dimensions of sustainability) as mere 'spa washing'. Therefore, though the issue of ensuring dignity at work in wellness tourism employment is one that cuts across cultural boundaries (Winchenbach et al., 2019), in this paper, we suggest that wellness tourism employment frameworks and initiatives are urgently needed to guide the sector's attempts to uphold employee dignity by providing better opportunities for these marginalised workers. This multi-faceted aspiration provides the basis for an over-arching research agenda that may, over time, enhance the decency and dignity of wellness tourism workers worldwide.

Disclosure statement

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