

Research Article

Assessing the Potential Growth of Iran's Hospitals with Regard to the Sustainable Management of Medical Tourism

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One of the fundamental areas of the tourism industry that has a significant impact on the economy of the host country is medical tourism. Many nations strive to establish a reputation both domestically and abroad. There is intense competition among nations to entice medical tourists, yet the motivating factors and purchasing patterns may be very different for different cultures. Healthcare decision-makers must employ efficient marketing strategies to secure a sustainable market share given the international rise of medical tourism. By interviewing the managers and patients of international hospitals, the current study aims to determine the potential growth of medical services with the idea of medical tourism in Iran. In addition, the basic indicators and significant categories are further distinguished by examining the key stakeholders and the perspectives of international patients toward medical tourism activities in Iran. To the best of our knowledge, the main emphasis in earlier studies was only on time, cost, and quality, although other indicators are needed for stakeholders to be investigated in this area. Despite Iran's rich natural, historical, and cultural heritage, a long history of political unrest and conflicts between reformists and fundamentalists regarding the benefits of tourism has hurt the industry's growth. The findings of this study, including the eight categories provided, make medical tourists aware of the cutting-edge technologies being used in the Iranian healthcare sector. It also includes tourist attractions that could be used in future research by employing multicriteria decision-making techniques to identify the most crucial ones for each nation.

1. Introduction

Most of the definitions of medical tourism describe it as a dual-purpose journey, usually abroad, for treatment and vacation, according to the literature. In addition, there are extensive studies explaining why people seek medical treatment abroad [1]. According to Mathijssen [2], the main reasons for international medical travel have been categorized as the relative price, waiting for the time of domestic treatment, unavailable or unaffordable procedures in their countries, healthcare quality and diversity, insurance status, anonymity and privacy, cultural affinity, technology, and modern treatments. While some believe that those who travel abroad are patients, not tourists, who only seek

medical examinations in other countries, others believe that tourism factors play an important role in patients' destination choices. Such a selection is decided with individual variations in the decision-making process to consider the requested medical procedure. On the other hand, there are various destinations for medical tourism, and it requires a reliable index to represent all the important indicators in this area [3].

One of the main concerns in each country is what are the main push and pull factors to attract more medical tourists. In this regard, the present study provides a reliable index for all stakeholders in this vast field by conducting numerous interviews with relevant stakeholders and policymakers. Many reasons affect the decision to choose a country for

treatment, the degree of importance of which varies according to different researchers. These reasons include two main parts related to the destination or host country and related facilities [4]. Hospitals play a vital role in the health system of any country, including Iran. In addition, they are a major destination for international patients. Therefore, the current research has been conducted to develop the main indicators related to hospitals, their destination, and the environment [5, 6].

To implement a sustainable health tourism system, many external and internal factors are involved. Customer satisfaction and customer experience are two different things, and actually, satisfaction is a part of customer experience. Therefore, creating a unique experience for customers is very important, especially internationally in the healthcare industry. Achieving these goals can be facilitated by the scientific method and by referring to valid international standards. This issue is especially important in the international market and health tourism, so the present study meets these requirements by introducing all related categories and subcategories. Numerous studies on medical tourism address various issues and viewpoints, such as the perceived risks involved [7], what should be done to ascertain the public's attitude toward the development of medical tourism [8], as well as the patients' consumption perspective [9], and the impact of country image [10]. Additionally, several academics have worked to suggest some effective tactics by taking into account the pandemic period and its impact on medical tourism [11]. It was crucial to take into account any management issues that might have an impact on a patient's decision from another country [12]. Finally, Ratnasari et al. in 2022 [13], Xu et al. in 2023 [14], and Sultana et al. in 2023 [15] investigated the primary indicator, namely sustainable medical tourism. Medical tourism will be a successful industry in any nation as long as people continue to hunt for its success criteria [16]. The current study's findings will provide managers in the medical tourism and healthcare organizations, such as hospitals, with an index to use as they work to improve the Iranian medical tourism industry.

In previous studies, the focus was only on time, cost, and quality, while this area needs more indicators to be considered by all stakeholders. By introducing new categories in the form of "findings," this study provides an index for the medical tourism industry and informs managers active in this industry of the basic factors. This research is qualitative research based on previous research that was conducted by conducting several interviews with managers and agents who are active in this field. The purpose of this study is to identify vital indicators in medical tourism related to international hospitals and the host country's situation. The obtained factor helps the stakeholders to get to know the most important internal and external factors of the medical tourism industry. The developed items can be used in any multicriteria decision-making method to prioritize elements based on destination. In addition, to realize the main goal of studying and conducting research in Iran's international hospitals, the theory of pressure and tension was chosen. This theory has been defined and developed by various

researchers to help with marketing aspects in various industries [5].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Background. This study explores the necessity for managers to prioritize urgent requirements and pay more attention to luring medical tourists by adopting the push and pull theory. Cost and service quality are critical elements that create a complementary dichotomy in the medical tourism industry. This is important because it links the pull factors for countries that attract medical tourists and the push factors for destinations that offer the needed healthcare services [17]. Push factor is the main reason behind choosing a destination as a tourist or international patient [18]. On the other hand, the attractiveness of the attributes of the tourist destination country is the pull factor. One method to identify the motivational element that applies, in this case, is the push-pull hypothesis [19]. The current study focuses on the pull and push factors that motivate medical tourists and link them to their destination [20]. The current study looks into the main characteristics of the pull and push variables based on the findings of Fettscherin and Stephano [21]. In addition, other researchers have noted additional connected aspects, such as cost [22], quality, and quicker access to health and medical facilities, that attract people to go for medical tourism [23]. In the field of medical tourism, the push-pull principle is crucial. For instance, Ye et al. [24] and Heung et al. [25] explored the motivational aspects of medical tourists, applying the push and pull theory.

2.2. Medical Tourism Definition. Due to the lack of a standard definition regarding medical tourism, we have gathered a few of the most relevant definitions here. According to Lee and Spisto [26], any travel that includes a medical procedure to improve the well-being of the traveler is a part of medical tourism. Medical tourism has been described by Jagyasi as traveling long distances or across the border to benefit from medical services offered abroad with direct or indirect engagement in leisure, business, or other purposes [27]. In developing countries, it has been one of the most profitable sectors in the tourism industry due to its inherent benefits to both the tourists, such as shorter waiting time and lower costs, and considering the medical services and facilities of the host country. According to medical practitioners, however, only those who travel abroad to receive treatment, that is, either less expensive or more accessible, are considered medical tourists [28]. Bookman and Bookman recognized the economic aspect of the practice and specified that it requires "trade in services" [29]. Based on the words stated by Jagyasi [27], medical tourism is a "set of activities in which a person travels often long distances or across the border to available medical services with direct or indirect engagement in leisure, business, or other purposes." For this study, we chose the definition offered by Kim et al. and identified the key factors prompting patients to travel abroad for medical treatments [30].

2.3. Universalization of Medical Tourism. According to Bookman and Bookman [29], the evolving reality of medical tourism is rooted in various suggested services globally. Smith and Forgione considered two distinct categories as the root [31]. They explained that these categories identify the primary factors considered by international patients in their decision-making process: weakness in internal factors and strength of external factors (host country facilities). This global growth has warranted standardized universal metrics set by global foundations, such as the Joint Commission on Accreditation for Health Care Organizations (JCAHO). To improve the safety and quality of healthcare and medical service, the JCAHO evaluates and endorses healthcare facilities and inspires them to conform to a quality standard for patient safety [32]. These goals are as follows:

- (i) Proper patient identification
- (ii) Effective communication
- (iii) Safe administration in treatment and used medicine
- (iv) Professional resection
- (v) Lower risk in medical care
- (vi) Reduced risk of fall-related injuries

“Service marketing triangle” explains the relationship between the three main actors in medical tourism, i.e. medical facilities, physicians, and medical tourists [33]. The service providers and supporters should cultivate a long-term relationship: one that not only satisfies stakeholders and their needs but also nurtures innovation and sustainability to provide safe and advanced medical treatments [34]. Two principal elements of needs, the coveted quality of life and limitations, and the environmental capacity for these needs should be considered to accomplish sustainability [35, 36].

2.4. Word of Mouth in Medical Tourism. It is expected that the overall medical tourism sector will reach a considerable revenue by 2027. Numerous factors drive people to seek treatment abroad, such as quality [37, 38], value and cost [39, 40], timely access to care, and even the destination [41, 42]. Despite considerable development in this area, economic and marketing issues, such as patient recruitment, are still lacking proper understanding. Only a few studies had focused on discovering an index for medical tourism indicators. The service and offers provided by the destinations are proved to be important factors in a patient’s decision-making process [43].

The patient’s evaluation of the service value to the probability of positive word of mouth must be considered. Word of mouth is defined as “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services,” which, as a marketing concept, has great development potential through cognitive, emotional, and interactionist perspectives [44]. The nature of products in service sectors such as medical tourism makes word of mouth very powerful with indications of its role in diminishing the inherent risk of such transactions. The limited research on word of mouth

and its role in medical tourism established its influence on end users and their attraction, with no details of the process except the fact that in medical tourism clientele greatly rely on recommendations from friends and family rather than the internet [45]. It is suggested that end users will rely more on word of mouth regarding medical tourism, while online channels will mostly serve functional roles such as fact-checking and bookings.

2.5. Medical Tourism in Iran. Despite Iran’s rich natural, historical, and cultural background, the development of the tourism industry has been negatively affected by a long history of political instability and disagreements between reformists and fundamentalists on the merits of tourism. However, tourism promotion, particularly medical tourism, has become more important since 2010 to remedy the country’s single-product economy and decrease oil revenue dependency. One of these factors is Iran’s prime location. It has many neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Iraq, and Pakistan. Moreover, Iranian medical and healthcare services are internationally renowned and relatively low cost with short waiting times, provided by experienced staff [46]. Iranian physicians perform at a level consistent with those seen around the globe, even though medicine is one of the most challenging academic specialties. A highly specialized ion therapy facility and infertility treatments should be mentioned among the capabilities, contemporary technology, and international standards. Additionally, foreign patients want access to a trustworthy index that highlights Iran’s primary assets and advantages for medical tourism. The worth of the current study will be displayed by the newly created index in the findings section.

2.6. Effect of COVID-19 on Medical Tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic, as an international public health crisis, had grave impacts on the global economy. Many businesses, large and small, closed down due to the great loss of life from the disease. In face of the new disease, many countries implemented lockdowns and quarantine measures, which stopped many manufacturing, construction, and service activities, followed by substantial job losses worldwide. However, some industries, particularly healthcare and the digital services sector, although less affected, had experienced pressure; while other sectors such as hospitality and tourism are among the worst affected [47].

As previously mentioned, the hospitality and tourism industries are gravely affected by the pandemic. Moreover, the pandemic resulted in the cancellation of elective surgeries and postponed various treatments, which in combination with travel restrictions have influenced medical tourism [48]. The irregularities in border crossings and quarantine measures had limited treatment options for those seeking medical treatment.

The recent pandemic has changed international travel immensely. Many countries have started new policies and guidelines, which affected the hospitality and tourism sectors. The new safety protocols could even transform the delivery of medical services and revolutionize medical

tourism, such as online video consultations, to facilitate wider access to affordable medical tourism in the post-pandemic period [49]. These new practices could guarantee the safe passage of medical tourism through these trying times, and they may remain later on to facilitate the delivery of services even after the pandemic. However, widespread vaccination could resuscitate medical tourism, and such destinations are better to proactively strengthen their relations with stakeholders in hospitality (such as treatment and recovery resorts, airports, and other transport providers) to enforce compliance with new protocols and procedures. Governments also play a crucial role in the progress of medical tourism in the future by considering the lessons learned from the pandemic in planning and employing the new guidelines. This practice will help travelers when selecting a destination in the postpandemic era [50].

It is anticipated that the cost of medical services provided for patients via medical tourism will diminish after COVID-19, and it will help medical tourism to grow again. Nevertheless, we first need to make sure of the safety of both patients and the host countries. The most important step would be to prevent any travel-related issues that the patients may encounter when traveling abroad for medical purposes. Hospitals and hotels should follow the official government guidelines and be expressive about the implemented measures to reassure staff and traveling patients [51]. Moreover, healthcare organizations should dedicate specific facilities for the isolation and quarantine of the patients' companions or arrange such facilities for them. They should also designate an isolated vehicle for their transport. Finally, their staff should be trained in new COVID-19 secure protocols for cleaning and disinfection in all the healthcare destinations and hubs to properly manage any accident and keep a safe environment [52].

2.7. Medical Tourism: Treatment, Therapy, and Tourism. Throughout history, a diverse set of needs and issues have forced people to travel, be it physical needs such as food and habitat or psychological needs such as relaxation and social relations. Modern humans travel for a wide range of reasons from leisure and fun to medical treatment [53]. The unbalanced distribution of medical or healthcare facilities worldwide is the main reason for the rapid growth of medical tourism [54]. Additionally, the relationship between available medical care vs. needed services in the home country significantly contributes to the growth of medical tourism [55–59]. People consider many factors, such as financial circumstances, regulatory policies and the political climate, quality of health care and its cost, as well as accreditation standards offered by those facilities, to choose the right medical destination for themselves [60].

Traveling abroad to countries that offer reasonable prices for excellent medical treatment is known as medical tourism [61]. The objectives are long-term healthcare treatment or elective surgery with distinct categories of diagnostic, clinical, invasive, or lifestyle-related medical orientations [62]. The most popular treatments for medical tourists

include cosmetic surgery, dentistry, cardiovascular, orthopedics, cancer treatments, weight loss treatments, and general tests and health check-ups [63]. Thailand, Hungary, Singapore, Malaysia, and India are among the most famous and fastest-growing medical tourist destinations in the world. Moreover, many chief medical service providers had invested in establishing modern facilities to attract medical tourists, which also advanced the Indian medical system's reputation around the world and improved its status among the leading countries in the field.

To support any medical destination, we could use the incentives of the end users (patients-customers) and their satisfaction. Their incentive is based on cost-effectiveness, distance, medical visa regulations and processing time, medical expertise and specialization in the destination, available modern technology, travel packages offered by the medical institution, and high clinical operations success rate. Patient satisfaction can be measured by recovery time and medical complications, communications with the institution, and cost considerations [21]. With growing medical tourism and its financial benefits, most institutions have dedicated special teams to cater to and communicate with potential customers about their packages and services. Given the intensity of the competition, some institutions have started hiring citizens of their target countries to overcome cultural and language barriers between visitors and employees. This approach will help the patients feel more comfortable and increase their satisfaction, resulting in an improved institutional reputation [64]. The six dominating subjects developed in the field are ethical implications, service quality, sensitive practices in medical tourism, health-specific medical tourism, marketing of medical tourism destinations, and globalization policies that impact international patients as opposed to issues associated with aesthetic medicine and organ transplantation [65].

Globalization and related policies changed the perspective of global boundaries and were a breakthrough for medical tourism. Thus, access to reliable and valid information to compare the medical system in different countries and make an informed decision could appertain to its growth. This complex decision can be simplified by considering various services offered by medical facilities, their proficiency in coordinating trips, and selecting the most appropriate medical hub, as well as attitude, expectations, and self-understanding [66].

The patients' experiences of medical facilities and their services could be used as a measurement of their satisfaction. Other dimensions that still need to be investigated are travelers' information sources and their reliability and privacy [67]. Risks of seeking medical care abroad, traveler's perspective and retrospective synergies, and finally the incentives for medical tourism are among current issues in medical tourism [44]. Furthermore, the new notion of medical tourism, which is concerned with a patient's health and safety while traveling, is driving researchers to be vigilant of various particulars of tourist mortality (kidnapping and murder), the spread of fatal diseases, traffic accidents, and minor hospitalization [68].

2.8. Medical Tourism Stakeholders. Stakeholders are those who either affect a company or are affected by its activities [69]. However, we only included the key stakeholders in our study. The most important stakeholders were selected comprising medical tourists, healthcare providers, government agencies, facilitators, accreditation and credentialing bodies, healthcare marketers, insurance providers, infrastructure, and facilities. Despite their different levels of involvement, these stakeholders play very important roles in the decision-making process of medical tourists since they are the ones who provide the initial information. The contribution of healthcare providers is the stakeholders and policymakers. Medical tourism destinations have enforced higher procedures on their hospitals so that they can provide high-technology professional health care equal to what is available in a different destination with high quality [70]. It includes high-tech technology and offers high-quality accommodation and amenities in excellent healthcare facilities on the same level as five-star hotels [71]. The new consumable concept of health care has altered the traditional usage of hospitals to a new term called hotel hospitals [72], which presented both hospitals' and hotels' services at the same time [73]. However, some scholars just emphasize the healthcare and hospitals facility, not other indicators.

Depending on the country, governments support the medical tourism industry in different ways since they rely on medical tourism to enhance their economic opportunities. Wang suggested new regulations and policies for each country to adjust the legal systems toward protecting foreign patients' health and safety [41]. Foreign patients are better protected in a transparent market, which is achieved through new policies and regulations, which in turn supports medical tourism development. When there was not much information about the treatment of existing diseases and methods, the emergence of medical tourism created a new role in the healthcare industry called medical tourism facilitator, which created and facilitated the relationship between medical tourists and healthcare providers [51].

Today, these facilitators are the specialized travel agencies that are responsible for reviewing and evaluating healthcare providers to ensure the quality of services as well as to evaluate patients who can travel. In the literature, two types of medical tourism facilitators have been defined [74]. These two types include those in the countries of origin (patient-oriented) or in the countries of destination (provider-oriented). The unfamiliar aspects of medical tourism such as specific medical services, language, cultural differences, and regulations account for a complex decision-making process, which forces many patients to consider help from facilitators to manage the process. Conner [6], documented that facilitators helped 52 percent of foreign patients gather their information on available treatments and the destination, while Alsharif et al. [75] reported that medical tourism facilitators were responsible for 53 percent of travel arrangements and bookings for patients in the United Arab Emirates.

2.9. Purchase Behavior and Perceived Risks. These impressions or feelings are usually influenced and divided into three types: complex images, organic images, and induced

images. Fakeye and Crompton [76] stated that tourists can have complex perceptions of the destination, which is related to their direct experience of their tourist destination. Tourists, on the other hand, can learn various nontourist images and information about their destination through the internet, radio, television, magazines, or other means of transmitting the information. In other words, part of the efforts of marketers in advertising tourist destinations such as magazines, brochures, and websites can directly affect the destination operator. This means that someone with a specific intention to travel would deliberately look for pertinent information through commercial or noncommercial materials, while organic images can be developed even in the absence of that desire [21]. Besides, since these images can familiarize the tourists with a destination and directly affect their decision-making process, the right image can benefit a destination and its brand significantly.

Generally, tourism is the direct interaction of different types of tourists and the local community which leads to different feelings and experiences for them [77]. The same happens between medical tourists and healthcare staff including the hospital's employees, managers, doctors, and nurses. The experience including commitment, trust, satisfaction, and high quality will cause the positive word of mouth and repurchase intention. Indeed, in choosing the hospital for treatment, it is hard to trust the services without experience and actual experience [44]. When it comes to purchasing behavior, it is related to satisfaction, loyalty, or quality of service. By considering purchase behavior and its crucial role in marketing medical tourism, this study put it among the indicators to be discussed with the participants.

Lack of information put medical tourists in a high-risk situation. The mentioned risk could have different aspects such as the image of a country, medical quality, and political sustainability. Then, it is among the priorities to focus more on the opportunities and the strengths of the destination country and decrease the negative feeling of medical tourists regarding any possible risk [78]. The perceived risks influence medical tourists' satisfaction and visit intentions. Based on previous research, perceived risk could be cultural, political, financial, functional, physical, social, or psychological [79]. The medical tourists' feelings of uncertainty are directly related to the provided services by the hospitals and negatively effects medical tourists' visit intentions and satisfaction [80].

2.10. Indicators of the Host Country. There are some indicators that completely relate to the host country as follows.

2.10.1. The Knowledge of the Host Country. Facts and principles accrued by humanity about a subject are generally referred to as knowledge. It comes in two forms: procedural (containing technical information and skills) and declarative knowledge (the concepts, interrelations, things, and facts that can be transferred verbally) [81]. Destination knowledge in tourism is usually declarative and is either based on the tourists' personal experiences or that of their family and friends or based on the information presented in media [82].

This knowledge can influence the destination image considerably since people can shape their mental pictures based on what they know and eventually form their own perceived images. Research shows that knowledge of a country influences medical tourists' perception of the destination image.

2.10.2. Safety and Security. Being more exposed to risks than the general population, tourists consider safety and security to be more important in their decision-making process than country image and price [2]. Safety and security are described as the likelihood of encountering criminal activities (e.g., pickpocketing), natural disasters (e.g., earthquake), or physical violence [32] and play an important part in the tourism industry's success as prerequisites to a country's image formation [83].

2.10.3. Availability and Convenience. In general, accessibility for any land-use activity means the quality of being easily reached from a location via particular transportation. In this study, we concentrated on easy access to the tourism destination with the existing transportation services. In tourism, accessibility consists of all transport infrastructures that connect tourists to and from the tourist destinations, be it air, land, or sea; and it has always been among the deciding factors in tourists' attraction to certain destinations [84]. As suggested by Aref and Gill [55], easy access to efficient transport consolidates a country's position in the competitive market with a great positive impact on tourists' perception of the destination image. In other words, accessibility is related to destination choice tourists' satisfaction and their intention to visit a destination and is very critical for medical tourists in their decision-making process.

2.10.4. Reasonable Prices. Another substantial factor that influences a consumer's choice of products or services is the price as consumers often compare the prices offered by competing businesses before making a decision [2]. In our study, we used a customer's perception of the price of a product or service compared to the competitors' prices to describe price reasonability. The price of a product or a service is very influential in determining customers' attitude toward the seller and in their assessment of the product and service experiences and, therefore, is believed to significantly influence a consumer's behavior decision and future interactions with the same enterprise [34]. Price, in medical tourism, refers to the cost of medical procedures and treatments. Medical tourists will compare these prices and choose the destinations with more reasonable prices, which is often the reason for patients looking for medical services abroad.

2.10.5. Impact of Word of Mouth. Word of mouth and social media play a fundamental role in this industry. Many studies have previously shown its direct impact on destination

TABLE 1: Demographic information.

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	46	63
	Female	29	37
	Total	75	100
Age	24 to 34	8	11
	35 to 44	25	33
	45 and above	42	56
	Total	75	100
Education	Undergraduate	15	20
	Master's	18	24
	PhD	42	56
	Total	75	100

image. In a study on 678 international tourists to Iran, Jalilvand and Heidari [56] reported that both face-to-face and online communications had significantly affected tourists' perception of the destination image.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection. Medical facilities, physicians, and medical tourists are the three main stakeholders involved in medical tourism [33]. Data for the current study were acquired from general and functional managers, policymakers, and international patients in Iran based on a qualitative investigation to cover all of the key players. Information about international hospitals in Iran that provide services to medical tourists was gathered over five months. The managers of the hospitals were promptly contacted by the authors, who briefed them on the importance of the study and invited them to take part in the interview.

The primary motivation for the interviews was an effort to take into account all facets of sustainability, including Iranian economic, social, and environmental challenges. The push and pull factors that affected their choice of the country were asked to be listed. The writers tried to categorize all the motivational elements into separate groups with corresponding subfactors after thoroughly analyzing each driving factor. Given the global surge in medical tourism, healthcare decision-makers must use effective marketing strategies to acquire a sizable market share. It tries to distinguish between the fundamental indicators and primary categories by looking at the major players and the opinions of foreign patients toward medical tourism activities.

The purpose of the current study's interview process was to choose any appropriate and suitable subjects [45]. The interviews were semistructured and were conducted by native speakers of Farsi and English [57]. The study is based on semistructured interviews with 40 international patients, 35 managers, and healthcare professionals. Table 1 displays the participant's demographic details.

After preparing the transcripts of the interviews, the authors listed any indicators that were mentioned by different participants. The categories and their subfactors are presented in the finding section. A preliminary study was carried out before the final distribution of the questionnaire

with 20 questionnaires to ensure the clarity of the questions. After the pilot test's conduction and collection, there was some questionnaire modification. The interviews contain 35 managers and healthcare staff and 40 international patients. Data were collected in international hospitals. To minimize the common method bias, managers were ensured confidentiality through a cover letter [58]. The study chooses Tabriz (neighboring Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey), Tehran, Mashhad (neighboring Afghanistan), Shiraz (A famous touristic place), and Rasht for data collection as they are the major medical tourism destination areas in Iran. As Gioia et al. [59] suggested to generate findings based on the research purpose, we must consider the main keywords. Then, by considering the main research questions and keywords, main eight categories were obtained (presented in the findings section).

3.2. Questionnaire Development. There are lots of reasons behind deciding to choose a country for treatment. Among the suggested items by scholars, the degree of their importance is different. Then, the first action was making a list of all the indicators including the main parts, elements, environmental issues, suggestions, or any difficulties. These factors include two main sections: the items related to the destination or host country and the items dealing with facilities. The questions were asking anything related to the host country and its environment, the facilities of hospitals and presence of qualified doctors and nurses, public health conditions, good infrastructure, weaknesses and strengths of Iran as a destination, the main customers, etc. The participants in the interviews were supposed to answer the following questions in the interview:

- (1) The main considerable characteristics of the host country and its environment
- (2) The quality of healthcare services and the perceived value
- (3) The facilities of hospitals, which deserve to be mentioned
- (4) Presence of qualified doctors and nurses
- (5) Public health conditions and the current status of available infrastructure
- (6) Touristic attractions
- (7) Safety of the country
- (8) Economic and social aspects of the host country
- (9) Weakness and strengths of Iran as a medical tourism destination
- (10) How to create value by providing a service and managing the patient's experience
- (11) The effect of their experience on reputation and referrals

4. Findings

Prior research mostly focused on time, cost, and quality, but this subject needs more indicators for all stakeholders to

investigate. This study will present an index for the medical tourism business and inform the managers working in this industry about the basic variables by adding new categories in the format of "findings." Stakeholders will benefit from knowing the most significant internal and external elements in the medical tourism sector thanks to the information acquired. The created items could be used to prioritize the elements based on the destination in any multicriteria decision-making process.

4.1. Category 1: Country Environment

- (i) Similarities in culture
- (ii) Good reputation
- (iii) Similarities in language
- (iv) Exchange rate stability
- (v) Low levels of corruption
- (vi) Safe environment for travelers

4.2. Category 2: Tourism Destination

- (i) The country is a perfect destination for a vacation
- (ii) There are numerous cultural and environmental attractions
- (iii) A well-known place for tourists to visit

4.3. Category 3: Medical Tourism and Other Costs

- (i) Accommodation cost is reasonable
- (ii) Flight Cost is reasonable
- (iii) Medical treatment is affordable
- (iv) Reasonable price of healthcare services
- (v) Reasonable price of transportation
- (vi) Reasonable prices of restaurants

4.4. Category 4: Facility and Services

- (i) High standards of medical care
- (ii) Medical technology
- (iii) High-quality treatments and materials
- (iv) The medical facility's accreditation
- (v) The hospital's reputation and quality of facilities
- (vi) Qualified doctors and nurses
- (vii) Personnel with international certifications
- (viii) Staff and physicians' responsiveness
- (ix) Medical personnel reliability
- (x) Competences of the doctor
- (xi) Hospital has high healthcare quality (e.g., a low rate of infection)
- (xii) Doctors have a good reputation
- (xiii) The nurses let us ask a lot of questions, so I was able to get all of my questions answered

- (xiv) The medical procedure was all thoroughly described by the staff
- (xv) The medical personnel was kind and polite
- (xvi) Setting up the medical treatment appointment is straightforward
- (xvii) When deciding on a medical procedure, the nurses gave close attention to the concerns
- (xviii) Patients have access to an adequate facility

4.5. Category 5: Supporting Services Quality

- (i) The hospital's services such as a cafeteria and public telephones were in a good location
- (ii) The hospital pays close attention to the confidentiality, anonymity, and disclosing of patients' information and data
- (iii) The hospital is equipped with cutting-edge technology
- (iv) Free internet access is available at the hospital
- (v) The payment process was simple and fast

4.6. Category 6: Destination Distinction

- (i) The city is unique with exciting touristic spots
- (ii) The city boasts unique features that you will not find anywhere else
- (iii) The city provides an alternative for any type of activity

4.7. Category 7: Perceived Value

- (i) It is worth paying for the medical services of such hospitals
- (ii) Comparatively, the costs are more flexible and affordable with other medical service providers
- (iii) The hospital provides cheaper cost with high-quality services

4.8. Category 8: Word of Mouth

- (i) The hospital and city were recommended to me, and I will suggest them to everyone who asks for my opinion
- (ii) Medical tourists from Iran are more likely to extend positive expressions about the medical services and treatment
- (iii) Medical tourists are among the positive stakeholders in the medical tourism business
- (iv) Medical tourists advertises the healthcare industry
- (v) Medical tourists recommend the ease of access
- (vi) Medical tourists recommended the reasonable price
- (vii) Medical tourists recommend the infrastructure and technology

- (viii) Medical tourists spread knowledge regarding the country and its safety.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

We learned how patients who undergo medical tourism assess the medical services and how it can put a strain on the medical personnel by concentrating on both consumers and providers. Interviews were conducted, and eight key criteria were presented as an index and a set of guidelines for all industry stakeholders.

We might provide significant information for practitioners, such as the importance of the critical function of the perceived services, buying behavior, perceived hazards, and good word of mouth [23]. In total, 11 criteria were established for developing the study question (listed in the related section). Hospital managers are advised to take into account both aspects of service delivery by highlighting the beneficial connection between word of mouth and encouraging medical tourism. This may require extending their influence to external destination characteristics that are now outside of their control. It has been demonstrated that cooperation between retail and tourism firms enhances visitors' experiences in the host nation. Here, the direct and indirect effects of the key medical tourism indicators were examined with a focus on several factors, including the host nation's situation and environment, tourist attractions, qualified hospital staff, high-quality services, cutting-edge medical technology, affordable prices, and safety. Additionally, in practice, it is impossible to disregard the beneficial effects of word of mouth, social media platforms, brokers, and medical tourism agencies. Additionally, we discovered that medical tourism providers generally employ competitive benchmarking, and they subsequently imitate one other's tactics (usually by expanding and adding more services).

We propose determining high-value specialties to attract patients from nontraditional markets instead of the common practices, which will eventually lead to loss of capital and damage the concern of sustainability in Iran. As a flourishing industry with a substantial impact on health care and tourism sectors, as well as the overall economic growth, insufficient studies on the medical tourism industry impelled us to design this study. Identification and classification of the major stakeholders in the field and a clear description of their main roles and responsibilities are vital; therefore, we tried to identify the central important stakeholders. The strong influence of governments on the industry means that stakeholders do not work in an isolated environment and will affect other related sections too. Considering the current situation of the healthcare system in Iran and the two most serious health crises faced by humankind since the 19th century, namely, the Spanish flu and the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for better collaboration between countries, real-time sharing of disease-related information, and transparency to respond and contain outbreaks were observed. The increased use of technology has helped health professionals with the delivery of remote medical care and counseling to patients. Prioritizing standard operating procedure updates on cleaning protocols for hospitals and

other facilities associated with medical tourism, training support, and the execution of these protocols allowed the delivery of necessary services to be continued during the pandemic, which could indicate radical changes in health-care and medical tourism. The crucial role of imparting knowledge and information to the patients, as coordinators, suggests that medical tourism facilitators should also be held up to higher standards, regarding the provided information and their knowledge of medical and legal issues; however, the service quality could vary from one to the other. There must be standard procedures for being internationally accredited for host countries if they want to remain compatible in the market.

Medical tourism coverage by health insurance would also be a great drive for the industry. As of now, most companies do not offer such plans due to uncertainties about the success rate of medical practice in developing countries. Nonetheless, the rising demand for medical tourism will necessitate such coverage which could especially help middle-class medical tourists [69].

As every stakeholder can administer new practices to improve the industry and all of them play a significant part in shaping its future, strong relationships between them are essential. Strong partnerships construct principles for cooperation and success and offer potential advantages to overcome different challenges. They eventually benefit destination countries. In conclusion, as an important economic agenda, medical tourism focuses on growth to generate revenue and improve the national status of the country, and this article enables policymakers to present policies that improve medical tourism services.

6. Managerial Implications

Regarding Iran, everything required to assemble the nation's facilities for medical tourism is currently present. Some patients travel to Iran for medical care, usually in low-cost specialties including dentistry, cosmetic surgery, and infertility. Although there are promising prospects, tragically the infrastructure needed to take advantage of these prospects is insufficient. Although our infrastructure is still weak, we have the basic minimum in terms of absorption facilities. The stakeholders must pay attention to all of the acquired elements and put them into action.

Sadly, the corona pandemic has made the issue worse by double. This pandemic caused a significant disruption in a market that was just starting, which would undoubtedly hurt the future market. About service quality, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intention, this study highlights the impact of advertisements and social media communication on hospital brand perception and brand trust formation as well as on medical tourists' perceptions and attitudes at the postconsumption stage. The best thing managers in this industry can do for the growth of medical tourism is to work with the key players to help them achieve their goals and establish their positions in the market more easily. Creating a competitive edge in the market is one of the finest tactics for a quick return on investment, and the best strategy for standing out from rivals is to increase the quality

of services through the implementation of certification standards within the business.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The marketing aspect of medical tourism is still greatly unknown, and for a successful venture, knowing the target market is paramount. Medical tourism stakeholders need an advertising guideline based on their perception to supply their safety and ethical aspects. The vendors should also be honest and realistic about what they can offer regarding each country to the medical tourists. Furthermore, since patients from different countries and different cultural backgrounds are looking for affordable yet high-quality medical services abroad, investigating various potential and experienced services and quality prospects and perceptions from different cultures is recommended. We suggest that future research should investigate different factors that could influence medical tourists' expectations and perceptions of service quality, such as cultural differences, which could offer considerable support for all the involved stakeholders.

The results aim to promote medical tourism and develop an indicator for both medical tourism service providers and receivers. It happens by providing categorized information. For long-term sustainability in medical tourism, there must be a holistic approach including whole aspects of a country besides the medical tourism issues. Future studies can focus more on the risks perceptions and investigate the cause roots. To analyze the purchase behavior of medical tourists, the personal and situational variables must be considered.

In the present study, the nature of the treatment and examination have not been considered. Another limitation is the influence of accompanying travelers on word of mouth. We suggest researchers employ a more holistic view in their future studies and investigate the "customer decision-making unit," comprised of patients and travel companions, instead of the patient as the principal unit, which would reflect the reasoning associated with word of mouth more accurately. One of the considerable limitations of the current research was ignoring the fundamental role of intermediaries and brokers in this industry. Like tourism industry, in medical tourism, anyone could be a stakeholder in this industry like the taxi driver who brings the patient from the airport and must be considered among stakeholders.

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are included within the article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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