

Health tourism destination branding in medical centers

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Abstract

The objective of the current research is destination branding for health tourism in medical centers of Yazd province. The present study is based on the pragmatism paradigm with an exploratory orientation, conducted as developmental research in a cross-sectional manner using a survey approach (interviews) through field studies; the research strategy was projective technique, and data collection was performed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 experts in health tourism and destination branding who were selected through purposive sampling; at this stage, the sample size was determined based on the theoretical saturation rule, and after three-level coding (open, axial, and selective), this concept was developed; the research findings indicate the necessity of attention to infrastructure factors, cultural factors, and economic factors as variables of health tourism destination country, tourism factors and destination branding factors of the city, advertising, sales promotions, brand communities, and public relations as communication tools variables, as well as physicians and nurses, medical center staff, and managers as human resources variables, and medical equipment/facilities and services as product/service variables.

Keywords:

Tourism destination, Health tourism, Tourism destination branding, Projection

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In today's world, health tourism is recognized as one of the most prosperous global industries, attracting millions of people annually to various destinations for medical services (Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo, 2023). Within this context, health tourism destination branding has emerged as a critical factor in attracting both domestic and international patients while creating sustainable competitive advantages for medical centers. A primary concern for health and tourism policymakers is establishing medical destinations as preferred and trustworthy options in the minds of global audiences through effective branding strategies.

Despite Iran's significant potential, particularly in Yazd province, for attracting health tourists, limited research has systematically examined the factors influencing destination branding in this context. A review of existing literature reveals that cultural perspectives and elements - themselves influenced by environmental changes - significantly impact branding. As Wijaya (2024) demonstrated, successful branding strategies can create innovative, distinctive products that foster loyalty among target audiences. Similarly, Ailawadi & Keller (2004) investigated how branding strategies create unique positions for brands across various sectors, contributing to sustainable competitive advantage.

Theoretical Framework

Branding

The rapid changes and transformations at the end of the second millennium, coupled with the emergence of new global challenges, have revealed the limitations of traditional forecasting-based planning methods (Linkon et al., 2024). This constant evolution creates an ongoing need for individuals to adapt to environmental changes (Kindström et al., 2024).

Tourism Destination Branding

Destination branding focuses on creating perceptions or reputations that attract investors and tourists. A strong destination brand serves as an effective tool for differentiation and developing emotional connections with consumers (Darwish & Burns, 2019).

Health Tourism Destination Branding

Health tourism, defined as travel for physical and mental health purposes lasting between 24 hours and one year, represents a rapidly growing sector of the tourism industry (Sattari et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study adopts a developmental approach within the pragmatism paradigm. Utilizing inductive reasoning and taxonomic modeling, the research employed projective techniques and expert interviews to develop the concept of health tourism destination branding. The cross-sectional field study involved purposive sampling of 12 experts (following theoretical saturation principles) from academia and healthcare management in Yazd province (Table 1).

1. Credibility: Verified through member checking with participating experts
2. Transferability: Ensured through peer review by university professors
3. Dependability: Established through audit trails by two external reviewers
4. Inter-coder reliability: Achieved >0.7 agreement between independent coders

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of 60-90 minute interviews (recorded with participant consent) yielded 60 open codes, subsequently categorized into 14 axial and 5 selective categories (Table 2). The study identifies critical success factors including:

1. Infrastructure, cultural, and economic considerations
2. Tourism and destination branding elements
3. Communication tools (advertising, promotions, PR)
4. Human resources (medical staff, administrators)
5. Service quality and medical facilities

Conclusion

Yazd province - and Iran more broadly - possesses the medical expertise, competitive pricing, and cultural attractions to become a regional health tourism hub. However, realizing this potential requires:

1. Strategic destination branding
2. Infrastructure development
3. Health diplomacy initiatives

The study provides a comprehensive framework for policymakers and healthcare administrators to enhance Iran's position in the global health tourism market through systematic destination branding approaches.