

Designing an Experiential Marketing Model in the Health Tourism Industry of Iran

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Abstract: The present study aims to design an experiential marketing model in the health tourism industry of Iran. This research is applied in nature, qualitative in methodology, inductive in approach, and interpretive in paradigm, incorporating theoretical foundations and interviews as the dominant research methods. The research strategy is based on grounded theory, and data collection was conducted accordingly. Interviews were conducted with experts and practitioners in health tourism to identify the factors and components shaping the experiential marketing model in the health tourism industry of Iran, particularly in the sector related to hospitals and medical centers. These interviews were primarily conducted in person (five participants) and, to a lesser extent, by telephone (three participants). Ultimately, the study concluded after conducting interviews with a total of eight participants. The criterion for determining the number of interviews was reaching theoretical saturation, meaning that from the seventh and eighth interviews, no new information emerged regarding the interview topics, thereby achieving theoretical saturation. In total, over 173 minutes of interviews were conducted over approximately three months through coordination with subject matter experts. The collected data from the interviews were analyzed using MAXQDA software. After a thorough examination of all interviews, analysis of participants' statements and perspectives, and a systematic review of relevant studies, a total of 78 codes were identified in the open coding phase. Following further analysis and categorization, six main categories and fifteen subcategories were identified.

Keywords: Experiential marketing, health tourism, customer experience.

1. Introduction

The concept of experiential marketing was introduced based on Pine and Gilmore's (1998) theory of experiential economy and the philosophy of empiricism. These researchers demonstrated how customer experience management could manifest in new products and services. Although services are intangible and products are tangible, both create memorable experiences for customers [1]. Experiential marketing, through customer experience management and word-of-mouth marketing, enhances brand equity among customers [2]. Customer experience is an internal and personal phenomenon that becomes ingrained in the minds of customers only when they interact with a product or service on a cognitive, physical, emotional, or spiritual level [3, 4]. Brand experience is a form of experiential marketing that shapes conditions influencing customers' emotions toward a product or service [5]. Experiential marketing is a strategic approach that fosters a deep and lasting

connection with customers by creating a memorable brand experience. In other words, this method not only enables customers to purchase a product or service but also allows them to truly experience it [6].

Today, growth and development are among the primary goals and aspirations of every country and society. Different societies strive to identify their capabilities in various fields and utilize them appropriately to ensure sustainable development. One of the domains that have received considerable attention for investment in growth and development in recent decades is the tourism industry [7, 8]. The tourism system comprises several elements. The tourism system introduced by Vanhoo (2005) provides a comprehensive framework, including tourism attractions, transportation facilities, institutional elements, tourism facilities, infrastructure, and accommodation centers. Vanhoo defines the tourism system as an interaction between tourism demand elements (tourists' motivations), intermediary elements (travel and marketing intermediaries), and tourism supply at the destination (services, facilities, and infrastructure) [9, 10].

One of the essential components of tourism development is marketing. Given the intense competition between tourism destinations, marketing plays a crucial role. The objective of tourism marketing is to identify and predict tourists' needs, provide necessary facilities, and create motivation for visits, ultimately ensuring tourist satisfaction and achieving organizational goals [3, 11, 12]. Among the factors that can enhance and develop the tourism industry in a country or specific regions are effective marketing mechanisms. Due to the service-oriented nature of tourism marketing, it possesses unique sensitivities. The intangible, perishable, heterogeneous, inseparable, and non-ownership characteristics of this service industry highlight the necessity of adopting an integrated marketing model in the planning process [13].

In recent years, health tourism has become so significant in the economic and social development of countries that economists refer to it as "invisible exports" [14]. Most countries have developed meticulous plans and extensive global advertising campaigns to capitalize on the substantial revenues and numerous advantages of health tourism. Consequently, given the competitive market for attracting health tourists, addressing this gap in Iran has become a necessity. Hospitals, due to the variations in service quality and costs worldwide, are among the key factors influencing the attraction of health tourists. Since health tourists seek high-quality treatments at lower costs, countries that succeed in attracting them are those that, in addition to offering competitive prices, also possess skilled physicians, natural attractions, and globally recognized service quality. Therefore, similar to other markets and products, the health tourism market is highly competitive, and attracting, retaining, and converting health tourism service users into loyal customers is of utmost importance [15, 16].

The existing literature highlights various aspects of marketing and customer engagement in the health tourism and broader tourism industry. Research by Rahimi et al. (2022) indicates that the marketing mix elements in public and private hospitals are generally in an acceptable state, though some hospitals require improvements in specific areas [3]. Similarly, Arfaei and Namamian (2022) emphasize the importance of integrated marketing, relational marketing, and electronic marketing in tourism, along with ICT components, as key factors in understanding tourism marketing strategies [17]. In the domain of branding, Faramarzpour et al. (2020) identify sensory marketing elements—including senses, emotions, thought, relationships, actions, reactions, and excitement—as critical indicators of cultural tourism branding [18]. Bajleet et al. (2022) further demonstrate that company value and perceived customer value mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and new business performance, highlighting the significance of customer perceptions [19]. Juliana et al. (2021) find that Islamic values and customer satisfaction significantly influence young Muslim tourists' motivation to revisit Bandung, Indonesia, with perceived tourism value playing a central role in this process [20]. Lishan et al. (2020) provide evidence that

customer interactions— with the environment, service employees, and other customers— positively affect perceived customer value, which in turn enhances customer engagement [21]. In the field of health tourism, Hu et al. (2020) find that perceived value and platform design positively influence customer travel decisions, while Shivakumar et al. (2019) argue that perceived value improves both mental and physical health through its impact on anxiety and memory enhancement [22]. Furthermore, Ho et al. (2019) demonstrate that perceived value positively affects customer satisfaction and loyalty in health tourism, with trust and commitment strengthening this relationship [23]. These studies collectively underscore the pivotal role of marketing strategies, customer perception, and engagement in the tourism and health tourism sectors.

In Iran, Article 87 of the Fourth Development Plan emphasizes the country's effective presence in global markets and its transformation into a regional center for meeting health and medical needs [24]. Iran is currently among the world's leading countries in certain medical sciences, such as stem cell therapy and spinal cord injury repair. Moreover, in fields such as infertility treatment, radiology, corneal and kidney transplants, liver transplants, various medical care services, dentistry, and cosmetic surgeries, Iran competes with developed countries [24-26]. With its numerous advantages in health tourism, including low costs, high-quality healthcare services, qualified physicians, and abundant natural attractions, Iran has the potential to become a major destination for international patients [27]. However, Iran has not yet reached an optimal level in health tourism. Despite the rapid global growth and development of the health tourism industry, Iran is not among the leading countries in attracting health tourists, and its share of revenue from this sector remains negligible. Some hospitals and medical centers operate independently in attracting patients from abroad and providing them with healthcare services, while some patients travel to Iran through informal channels [28, 29].

Given these considerations, this study seeks to answer the primary research question: What is the experiential marketing model in Iran's health tourism industry?

2. Methodology

The present study is classified as a fundamental research endeavor. Since the researcher aims to develop an applicable model, the qualitative phase of the study is based on an interpretive approach. This approach ensures that the research findings are not only practically useful but also theoretically profound. Overall, the research process follows a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts, including managers and university professors in the fields of tourism, cultural heritage, handicrafts, and tourism. The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that the researcher proceeded without focusing on a specific number of interviews. Sampling was conducted within the framework of qualitative research logic using a purposive sampling method. Specifically, a non-probabilistic purposive snowball sampling technique was employed.

The data collection process involved both library research and field methods, including interviews and questionnaires. The validity and reliability of the research were assessed based on credibility criteria, member checking, triangulation of data sources, negative case analysis, and transferability. The extracted data were coded using grounded theory methodology, leading to the final model.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the experts are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Experts in the Qualitative Phase

Demographic Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	10	62.5%
	Female	6	37.5%
Education	Bachelor's Degree	3	18.75%
	Master's Degree	5	31.25%
	PhD	8	50%
Work Experience	Less than 7 years	2	12.5%
	7 to 14 years	8	50%
	More than 15 years	6	37.5%

Due to the novelty of the study and the unknown factors associated with health tourism, this research employs a qualitative methodology and is considered fundamental in nature. The grounded theory approach was used to extract theories from the collected data. In grounded theory, analysis begins with data collection and continues until theoretical saturation is reached.

To develop the model, semi-structured interviews and existing documents and resources were utilized. Additionally, to determine the optimal indicators, expert opinions from both health tourism professionals and tourists were gathered.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Participants, including health tourism industry experts and health tourists, were selected using purposive sampling. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured and in-depth manner. Immediately after each interview, the researcher documented personal perceptions and observations. The process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. At the saturation stage, data began to repeat, and no new information emerged to further develop the categories. As the researcher repeatedly reviewed similar data, empirical confidence was established that the identified categories were sufficiently developed.

In this study, theoretical saturation was reached after analyzing data from interviews with eight experts in the field of health tourism, including academic and industry professionals such as hospital administrators specializing in health tourism, university experts in tourism and medical tourism, physicians, and senior managers in healthcare and tourism-related services. Additionally, eight health tourists who had traveled to Mashhad for medical treatment or surgery within the past year were interviewed. The compiled interview reports were carefully reviewed and provided to the interviewees for verification to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Following data collection, the analysis was conducted using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding based on the guidelines of Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Open coding facilitates the creation of primary conceptual categories rooted in raw data while maintaining methodological rigor. There are two main approaches to data analysis in coding methods. Some researchers conduct a detailed, line-by-line and word-by-word analysis of texts and data. Others, due to time constraints, focus only on key points and major themes for coding.

In this phase, the researcher meticulously reviewed the data line by line, identified the underlying processes, and assigned codes using relevant words and phrases. All critical themes from the interviews were extracted and assigned appropriate labels. For example, from a statement made by one of the interviewees from the hospital and

healthcare sector, the researcher identified the initial code: "advanced specialized equipment available in hospitals and medical centers in Mashhad."

Table 2. Example of Open Coding

Meaning Units	Interviewee Code	Open Codes
"Our hospital is a fully equipped hospital... There are advanced specialized facilities and equipment in hospitals and medical centers..."	5, 6, and 8	Advanced specialized facilities and equipment
"Value co-creation occurs with the mutual presence of tourists and tourism-related organizations. Customers who receive greater value in this process develop a higher emotional commitment to the organization, increasing the likelihood of loyalty behaviors... Tourists who feel that their opinions and suggestions are considered... Tourists' satisfaction with the provided services leads them to recommend visiting and using this destination to friends and relatives... Customer participation in service provision enhances service quality, increasing organizational efficiency."	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8	Willingness to reuse medical services – Preference for medical services
"Customer co-creation behaviors depend on customer interactions. Profitable customers for companies are those who have a pleasant interaction with employees and managers and are willing to voluntarily share their experiences. Employees and managers can use these suggestions to improve and develop the tourism industry... Tourism-related organizations that consider tourists in their decision-making processes result in tourists developing a high level of commitment to the company, leading to responsible behavior, support, service development assistance, and tolerance of tourists."	1, 2, 4, 6, and 8	Commitment to all tasks – Participation in surveys and satisfaction assessments – Responsible behavior
"Transforming a hospital into a recognized medical center and a brand highly depends on collaboration with specialized and experienced doctors and surgeons."	9, 10, 15, and 16	Health tourism capabilities
"We have conducted necessary negotiations to establish the required infrastructure for easy use of insurance policies for health tourists."	12, 13, and 14	Health tourism infrastructure

In the next stage, due to the large number of initial codes, they are transformed into more abstract conceptual codes. By continuously comparing the codes in terms of similarities and differences in concepts, subcategories and ultimately main categories are formed. The outcome of this stage is the distillation and summarization of the vast amount of information obtained from interviews and documents into concepts and categories that align with similar questions. Based on the interview analysis, 78 initial open codes (concepts) were identified.

Axial coding is the second stage of data analysis in grounded theory. At this stage, a structured set of codes and initial concepts is formed, resulting from a thorough and detailed review of categories and interviews conducted during the open coding phase. The focus of this phase is more on the codes and concepts rather than raw data. The objective is to establish relationships between the categories identified in the open coding phase.

Causal conditions refer to events or occurrences that lead to the emergence or expansion of a phenomenon. One main category, health tourism capabilities, and four subcategories—cultural awareness, service development capabilities, human resource management, and communication capabilities—were identified as causal conditions. The subcategories are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Causal Concepts and Categories

Main Category	Subcategories	Related Concepts
Health Tourism Capabilities	Cultural Awareness	Managers' belief in co-creating value Employees' trust in co-creating value Emphasis on customer orientation Promotion of a culture of helping others
	Service Development Capabilities	Needs assessment through suggestion systems

Human Resource Management	Design, development, and improvement of medical service packages based on needs assessments and feedback
	Establishment of health tourism units for international patients
Communication Capabilities	Recruitment of specialized and experienced doctors and surgeons
	Doctors holding international certifications
	Ability to communicate with patients (fluency in an international language)
	Outstanding medical track record
	Coordination between the medical staff and the health tourism unit
	Availability of multiple communication channels such as phone and email
	Accessibility of nurses and staff
	Continuous monitoring and care of patients and their companions
Establishment of respectful and constructive communication with patients	
Patience and tolerance of hospital staff in interactions	
Order and organization in hospital procedures	

The contextual conditions refer to specific characteristics and settings that shape the phenomenon under study. They represent the environment in which action and reaction strategies take place. In this study, two main categories—health tourism infrastructure and experiential marketing—and subcategories such as brand experience (before customer engagement), service experience (during customer engagement), and post-service experience (after customer engagement) were identified as influential environmental factors, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4. Contextual Concepts and Categories

Main Category	Subcategories	Related Concepts
Experiential Marketing	Brand Experience (Before Customer Engagement)	Brand image
		Service evaluation
	Service Experience (During Customer Engagement)	Interaction with employees
		Marketing strategy
	Post-Service Experience (After Customer Engagement)	Technology
		Customer relationship management
		Error acceptance
		Customer behavior analysis
		Service quality improvement
		Establishment of a support unit
Health Tourism Infrastructure	-	Coordination between tourism infrastructure, medical centers, and hospitals
	-	Transportation system for tourist mobility
	-	Banking system, including the use of credit cards
	-	Medical tourism as a tool for strengthening international relations
	-	Ease of using insurance policies
	-	Shorter patient admission and treatment processes
	-	Advanced communication networks and information systems
	-	Hardware and software facilities
	-	Development of communication and telecommunication networks

Intervening conditions refer to the broad structural context in which the phenomenon occurs and a series of specific conditions that influence the strategy. In this study, the main category of attitude toward the health tourism industry and two subcategories—empowerment of the health tourism industry and characteristics of the health tourism industry—were identified as intervening conditions, as detailed in Table 5.

Table 5. Intervening Concepts and Categories of the Study

Main Category	Subcategories	Related Concepts
Attitude Toward the Health Tourism Industry	Empowerment of the Health Tourism Industry	Learning of travel agencies in the medical tourism sector Customer awareness Customer clubs
	Characteristics of the Health Tourism Industry	Marketing strategy in the health tourism industry Strategy of hospitals and medical centers in medical tourism

Strategic conditions refer to the set of interactions and actions that actors exhibit in response to existing conditions. In this study, the main category health tourism mix was identified as a strategy, as detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Strategic Concepts and Categories of the Study

Main Category	Subcategories	Related Concepts	
Health Tourism Mix	Health Tourism Product	Provision of rapid and efficient healthcare services Credibility and reputation of physicians Advanced medical equipment Specialized and advanced facilities in hospitals and medical centers Available amenities and facilities in hotels, medical centers, and guesthouses	
		Health Tourism Cost	Cost-effectiveness of medical treatments and surgeries Accommodation expenses for patient companions in lodging facilities Pricing levels for supplementary medical services International health insurance
		Health Tourism Location	Hospital location and proximity to tourist attractions and commercial centers Availability of suitable accommodation for companions near medical centers Iran's attractiveness as a health tourism destination Medical tourists' perception of Iran's medical capabilities
		Health Tourism Promotion	Provision of additional services by organizations (e.g., airport transportation, visa facilitation, special pricing packages for medical procedures, hotel accommodations, and travel tours) Content creation by tourists

Consequential conditions refer to the outcomes that result from the strategies implemented. These consequences are the direct or indirect effects of actions and reactions. Outcomes may be unpredictable, unintended, positive or negative, explicit or implicit, and may occur in the present or future. Additionally, what is considered a consequence at one point in time may later become a contributing factor to new conditions. The study identified the consequential categories, as presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Consequential Concepts and Categories of the Study

Main Category	Subcategories	Related Concepts
Growth of the Health Tourism Industry	Customer Outcomes	Reuse of services Customer satisfaction Customer commitment Customer loyalty
	Health Tourism Outcomes	Improvement of healthcare service quality Increased global market share Creation of a positive image for medical tourism

At this stage, the major categories are integrated into a model centered around the core category. The developed model formally describes the interconnections among these categories. The final model of this study, based on the results of axial and selective coding, is presented below:

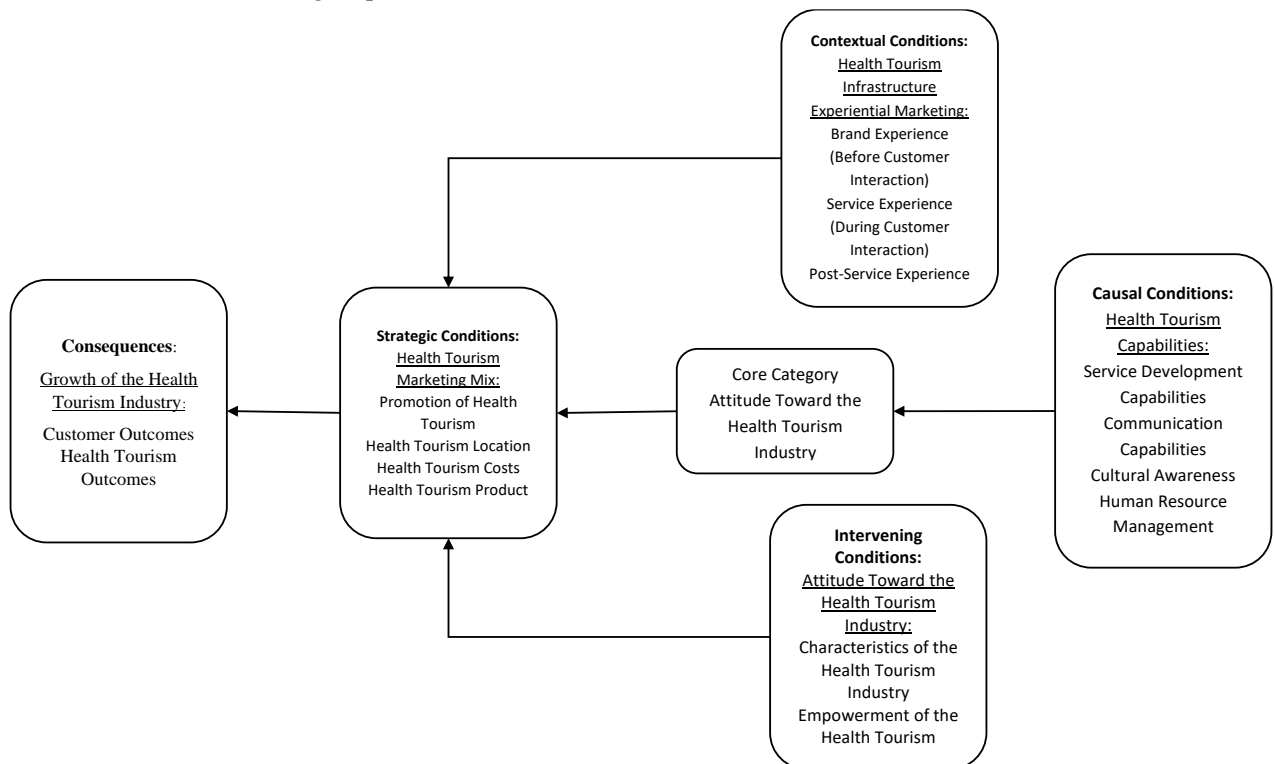


Figure 1. Experiential Marketing in Iran’s Health Tourism Industry

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Experts believe that the demand for health tourism in Iran is increasing daily. This trend has led many hospitals and medical centers in Iran to engage in new planning and propose innovative initiatives, including constructing new facilities with modern equipment, advanced technology, and higher capacity. Simultaneously, some centers have focused on upgrading their outdated equipment and expanding their existing capacities, which has intensified competition. As a result, the growth of health tourism in the province has contributed to the improvement of health tourism infrastructure.

The health tourism industry, encompassing the tourism marketing mix, plays a crucial role in shaping a favorable image in individuals' minds. In the field of experiential marketing, a positive customer experience with a brand significantly influences tourist satisfaction and affects their perception of value, which in turn impacts their

willingness to interact directly with companies and collaborate in the development of the health tourism industry. Maintaining continuous engagement with tourists and sharing tourism-related information and experiences can enhance the health tourism industry, aligning with the prior findings [3, 5, 17, 19, 30]. The increasing focus on elements of the health tourism marketing mix is among the concepts that can be used to analyze the current situation and plan for achieving an optimal state in the health tourism sector.

Attracting health tourists and establishing a health tourism brand for hospitals and medical centers in Iran largely depend on the design and provision of medical products and services, competitive pricing, planning for accommodations and amenities, and ultimately, the promotion of new medical services and achievements. In health tourism, the concept of motivation is employed to understand tourist behavior and decision-making processes regarding travel. This understanding can guide authorities and organizations providing healthcare services in attracting health tourists and meeting their needs throughout their journey to a specific health tourism destination. Highly motivated tourists exhibit a strong commitment to participating in the health tourism industry. Therefore, tourism-related companies and organizations should implement measures that enhance tourist motivation, which aligns with the prior findings [3, 5, 6, 13, 14, 16, 24, 31].

Trust in the medical services provided by hospitals and healthcare centers, tourists' enthusiasm for attending hospitals for diagnostic consultations and treatments, and their sense of attachment are among the key factors cited by health tourists in choosing medical centers in Iran. Health tourists believe that without their participation, the quality of health tourism services in hospitals and medical centers in the province will not improve. If tourists intensify their interactions with hospital administrators and medical staff, the elements of the health tourism marketing mix will better align with their needs and demands. Tourists' willingness to participate in resolving challenges faced by medical centers, establishing positive and constructive communication with medical staff, and engaging in meaningful discussions with hospital personnel are among the notable aspects of health tourists' interactions.

Customer behavior in the health tourism industry is a critical and influential factor in tourism. Tourists remain loyal to a health tourism destination if they recognize it, have a positive perception of it, engage with it, or participate in its tourism-related activities. These findings align with the prior research [1, 19-21, 23]. The degree of tourists' loyalty to health tourism destinations is reflected in their intention to revisit the destination and their willingness to recommend it to others. Health tourists have stated that due to the services, products, and other facilities available in hospitals and medical centers in Iran, they prefer the medical services of this province over those of other regions and are committed to using these services again.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that organizations responsible for Iran's health tourism industry should use the proposed model to establish experiential marketing in the sector. They must consider influential factors such as fostering an appropriate organizational culture among employees, developing a well-structured organizational framework, creating communication channels via the internet and social media using relationship marketing mechanisms and customer relationship management, and enhancing human resource management by emphasizing the utilization of human and organizational knowledge and skills. Additionally, the key factors of the health tourism industry—including the quality of medical services and reputable physicians, the cost of medical services, accommodation and transportation facilities, and health tourism support packages—play a significant role in stimulating tourist motivation, resources, and engagement within the health tourism sector.

Furthermore, aligning the health tourism industry model with the development of shared behaviors is a prerequisite for the success of Iran's health tourism industry. Therefore, Iranian health tourism organizations and

institutions should strive to strengthen factors such as interaction, knowledge sharing, creativity, and tourists' trust to foster higher levels of tourist loyalty and enhance their engagement in health tourism. A culture of hospitality requires identifying and addressing obstacles and deficiencies in providing services to health tourists. To this end, it is recommended that a continuous evaluation of health tourists' satisfaction and their companions' feedback regarding the medical services received be conducted.

Given that the treatment process for some medical conditions extends for several months after patients leave the hospital, it is suggested that hospitals and medical centers maintain communication with patients or their companions through various channels, including phone, email, or social media. Future researchers could analyze the experiential marketing model in health tourism across other segments of health tourism, such as wellness and preventive tourism, considering Iran's natural and geographical conditions.

Since this study was conducted exclusively in Iran, future research could examine the model and relationships among the study variables in other health tourism destinations to explore whether different findings emerge based on the conditions of other health tourism regions. Research limitations are among the most significant challenges in achieving research objectives. Limitations are an inherent part of the research process and exist even before a study begins. Research limitations are generally divided into two categories: inherent limitations, which exist in all studies, and specific limitations unique to a particular study. Due to the broad scope of the health tourism industry, this study focused exclusively on medical tourism.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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