Journal of Tourism Management Research
2024 Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 38-48
ISSN(e): 2313-4178
ISSN(p): 2408-9117
DOI: 10.18488/31.v11i1.3700

Perception of medical tourism image from the perspective of healthcare professionals: The case of Turkey

Erhan Dag[1]
Yasar Demir[2+]
Zeynep Aydin Kilinc[3]
Bahadir Yazicioglu[4]

[1]*Kutahya Health Sciences University, Gediz Vocational School, Kutahya, Turkey.*
Email: erhan.dag@ksbu.edu.tr
[2]*Samsun Ayvacik State Hospital, Samsun, Turkey.*
Email: mszydsimal@gmail.com
[3]*Alanya District Directorate of Health, Alanya, Antalya, Turkey.*
Email: dtzeynepaydinkilinc@gmail.com
[4]*Samsun Training and Research Hospital, Samsun, Turkey.*
Email: bahadiryazicioglu@gmail.com


(+ Corresponding author)

Article History
Received: 27 December 2023
Revised: 26 February 2024
Accepted: 12 March 2024
Published: 29 March 2024

Keywords
Destination image
Health tourism
Healthcare professionals
Medical tourism
Perception
Turkey.

ABSTRACT

The study aims to reveal Türkiye's medical tourism destination image and its determinants from the perspective of healthcare professionals. The cross-sectional study population consists of healthcare professionals working in public hospitals in Türkiye (N=1.142.469). The research data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of statements aiming to reveal the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. The "medical tourism image scale" was used in the second part of the questionnaire. The study data were collected online between July 1, 2022, and March 31, 2023. Of the participants, 64.9% were female, 58.1% were married, 37.7% were between the ages of 18-29, and 31.7% were physicians. 76.7% of the participants chose their profession willingly, 80.2% were dissatisfied with their lives in general, 23.9% were working in the Black Sea Region, and 56.9% stated that economic instability was the biggest obstacle to medical tourism. As a result of the study, the total score on the medical tourism scale was 94.270±12.751. According to the results of the correlation analysis, there was a relationship between service quality, safety and security, cost, tourism opportunities, hygiene, and accessibility ($p<0.001$). Türkiye's medical tourism destination image is high, according to healthcare professionals. However, healthcare professionals think that economic instability is the biggest obstacle to medical tourism. The most important conclusion of the study is that service quality, safety and security, cost, tourism opportunities, hygiene level, and accessibility are essential factors in forming a medical tourism image.

Contribution/Originality: Türkiye is one of the countries whose value has increased in medical tourism in recent years. For this reason, there is no study measuring the medical tourism image perception of health personnel working in Turkey. Therefore, it is thought that the study will bring a different perspective to the literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the phenomenon of medical tourism has witnessed substantial growth, notably in nations like India, Malaysia, Türkiye, and Singapore, attributed primarily to escalating healthcare costs in developed countries alongside the enhanced quality and affordability of healthcare services in developing nations. The increasing qualifications of healthcare professionals further propel this trend, diminish waiting times, and elevate patient satisfaction levels. Specifically, over the last two decades, Türkiye has distinguished itself within medical tourism

thanks to its strategic health policies and advancements in health tourism infrastructure. The country's ascendancy as a preferred medical tourism destination is underpinned by its provision of high-quality healthcare services, access to proficient healthcare professionals, cost-effectiveness, shorter waiting durations, and considerable patient contentment, establishing Türkiye as a leading choice for international medical tourists (Farrukh, Shahzad, Sajid, Sheikh, & Alam, 2022; Sag & Zengul, 2019; Tapia, Dieste, Royo, & Calvo, 2022; Tengilimoğlu, 2021; Tosun, Demir, & Sağlık, 2020). Countries consider medical tourism strategic tourism with many economic benefits (Çapar & Aslan, 2020). This sector has become a significant competitor in many developing destinations and continues to grow rapidly. Many factors affect the intentions of potential medical tourists to participate in medical tourism and the destinations they choose. Destination selection consists of a three-stage process. The first of these is searching, the second is satisfaction and impression, and the third is the service provided after medical tourism (Cooper & Buckley, 2022; Habibi, Mousavi, Jamali, & Ale Ebrahim, 2022). In Türkiye, the USHAŞ (International Health Services Inc. of Türkiye) was established in 2019 to monitor health tourism services from a single source, increase satisfaction, and attract more tourists through bilateral agreements. Moreover, the "health Turkiye" website was launched in connection with USHAŞ. This aims to make the promotion and marketing activities of the services more dynamic and provide state support (Healthturkiye, 2023). The medical tourism market, which was valued at 15.5 billion dollars worldwide in 2017, is estimated to be worth 28 billion dollars by the end of 2024. Medical tourism with a market of this size is a great opportunity for developing destinations with high unemployment rates and current account deficits (Kodalak & Baltaci, 2022; Küçükali, Palteki, Dündar Ege, & Hayran, 2022). In this sense, 1,258,382 health tourists visited Türkiye in 2022 to receive health services. In the first quarter of 2023, this number was 746,290. From these visits, Türkiye had a revenue of 2,119,059 US dollars in 2022 and 1,033,942 US dollars in the first quarter of 2023. The branches most frequently used by medical tourists were gynaecology and obstetrics, internal medicine, and dentistry (USHAŞ, 2023). Several factors affecting destination choice in medical tourism are indispensable for medical tourists and tourism destinations. Destinations aspiring to enter and attract a portion of the medical tourism market are keen to understand the elements that influence the selection of a destination by medical tourists. Furthermore, there is a focus on creating novel tactics with the goal of improving the reputation of these locations. In national and international studies, the most significant of these factors are environmental and economic factors, tourism opportunities, hygiene level, security, government guarantee, health service quality, cost, and post-treatment services. In the national and international literature, many studies affecting the destination choice and motivations of medical tourists have been conducted (Çapar & Aslan, 2020; Cham, Lim, Sia, Cheah, & Ting, 2021; Khan, Chelliah, & Haron, 2016; Rahman, Martin, & Liu, 2022; Üstün & Uslu, 2022). However, no study has been found that evaluates destination choice and motivations from the perspective of healthcare professionals. Many previous studies have investigated these factors through medical tourists. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate Türkiye's medical tourism destination image and its determinants from the perspective of healthcare professionals in relation to six crucial factors that are thought to affect destination image.

2. METHODS

2.1. Population and Sample of the Study

The study population consists of healthcare professionals working in the public sector in Türkiye (N= 1,142,469) (General Directorate of Health Services, 2020). The minimum sample size of the study was determined to be 665 at a 99% confidence limit, 50% prevalence, and a 0.05 error level (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2018).

2.2. Data Collection Tools

The research data were collected by using the "Personal Information Form" and "Medical Tourism Scale" to determine the personal characteristics of healthcare professionals.

Personal information form: It consists of 15 statements aiming to reveal the personal characteristics of healthcare workers.

Scale for Medical tourism: Jotikasthira (2010) developed the scale. Çapar and Aslan (2020) conducted a study on the scale's Turkish validity and reliability. The scale is scored as a 5-point Likert type: "1-strongly disagree" and "5-strongly agree." Statements 1-7 consist of "service quality," statements 8-13 consist of "safety and security," statements 14-19 consist of "cost," statements 20-23 consist of "tourism opportunities," statements 24-25 consist of "hygiene level" and statements 26-27 consist of "accessibility" sub-dimensions. The minimum score to be obtained from the scale is 27, and the maximum score is 135. The Cronbach Alpha value of the scale was found to be 0.807 (Çapar & Aslan, 2020; Jotikasthira, 2010). In this study, the Cronbach Alpha value of the scale was found to be 0.886.

2.3. Data Collection

The cross-sectional study data were collected between July 1, 2022 and March 31, 2023, using the online questionnaire collection technique. A total of 1134 completed questionnaires were analysed.

2.4. Data Analysis

In the study, data analysis was performed with SPSS 25.00 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), a widely used software package for statistical analysis in social science research. The data evaluation included number, frequency, and percentage analyses to define demographic characteristics. Since the skewness and kurtosis values of the scale were determined between -1.5 and +1.5, the student t-test and ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), a statistical method used to compare the means of three or more independent groups to determine if there are any statistically significant differences between them, were performed. Correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationship between the scale and sub-dimensions. The statistical significance level was taken as ($p<0.05$).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants (N:1134).

Characteristics	N (1134)	%
Gender		
Female	736	64.9
Male	398	35.1
Marital status		
Single	475	41.9
Married	659	58.1
Age		
18-29	427	37.7
30-39	207	18.3
40-49	337	29.7
50 and above	163	14.4
Profession		
Physician	360	31.7
Dentist	282	24.9
Nurse / Midwife	289	25.5
Dietician /Psychologist/ Social worker/ Child development specialist	13	1.1
Health technician / Health officer (Anaesthesia-radiology-laboratory- Emergency Medicine Technician -paramedic-mouth and dental health-medical secretary	190	16.8
Education level		
High school/Associate degree	78	6.9
Licence	364	32.1
Master's degree	410	36.2
PhD/Medical speciality/ Dentist speciality	282	24.9
Working year (Min.-Max.)	0-40	12.82±11.308

3. RESULTS

Among the healthcare professionals who participated in the study, 64.9% were female, 35.1% were male, 58.1% were married, and 37.7% were between the ages of 18-29. Among the participants, 31.7% were physicians, 36.2% were postgraduate graduates, and the average working years were 12.82±11.308. Table 1.

Table 2. Other characteristics of the participants (N: 1134).

Smoking		
Yes	267	23.9
No	778	68.6
I quit	89	7.8
Voluntary choice of profession		
Yes	870	76.7
No	264	23.3
General life satisfaction		
Yes	225	19.8
No	909	80.2
General health satisfaction		
Yes	509	44.9
No	625	55.1
In your opinion what is the biggest obstacle to medical tourism?		
Political reasons	212	18.7
Terror issues	36	3.2
Religious beliefs	8	0.7
Epidemics	233	20.5
Economic instability	645	56.9
Violence by the patient's relatives		
Physical violence	43	3.8
Verbal violence	487	42.9
No violence	604	53.3
The region where you work		
Mediterranean region	271	23.9
Eastern Anatolia region	25	2.2
Aegean region	247	21.8
Southeastern Anatolia region	21	1.9
Central Anatolia region	105	9.3
Black sea region	261	23
Marmara region	204	18

Of the participants, 68.6% did not smoke, 76.7% chose their profession willingly, 80.2% were dissatisfied with their lives in general, 44.9% were satisfied with their health in general, 42.9% had been exposed to verbal violence, 23.9% worked in the Black Sea Region, and 56.9% stated that the biggest obstacle to medical tourism was economic instability Table 2. Table 3 shows the mean scores of the medical tourism scale and its subscales. Service quality (min-max, 7-35) 20,340±3,921; safety and security (min-max, 6-30) 22,690 ± 3,912; cost (min-max, 6-30) 20,810±3,972; tourism opportunities (min-max, 4-20) 14,730±2,861; hygiene level (min-max, 2-10) 5,970±1,173; accessibility (min-max, 2-10) 5,750±1,674 and total mean score of medical tourism scale (min-max, 27-135) 94,270±12,751. Table 3.

Table 3. Medical tourism scale and subdimension means.

Scale and sub-dimensions	Min.	Max.	$\bar{x}$	*SD*
Service quality	7	35	20.340	3.921
Safety and security	6	30	22.690	3.912
Cost	6	30	20.810	3.972
Tourism opportunities	4	20	14.730	2.861
Hygiene level	2	10	5.970	1.173
Accessibility	2	10	5.750	1.674
Total medical tourism scale	27	135	94.270	12.751

Table 4. Comparison of socio-demographic characteristics of participants and medical tourism scale sub-dimensions.

Variables	Service quality	Safety and security	Cost	Tourism opportunities	Hygiene level	Accessibility
	$\bar{x} \pm S$					
Gender						
Female	20.09±3.803	22.55±3.849	20.77±3.652	14.58±2.571	6.00±1.164	5.68±1.570
Male	20.81±4.068	22.94±4.182	20.89±3.781	15.00±3.381	5.91±1.189	5.88±1.847
p	0.003	0.111	0.579	0.018	0.247	0.076
Marital status						
Single	19.25±3.996	21.34±3.764	19.87±3.675	14.28±2.628	6.14±1.156	5.86±1.466
Married	21.13±3.656	23.66±3.836	21.49±3.564	15.06±2.977	5.84±1.170	5.68±1.466
p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.092
Age						
18-29	19.06±3.682	21.03±3.551	19.75±3.288	13.92±2.410	6.07±1.158	5.87±1.475
30-39	20.73±3.881	22.99±3.098	21.21±3.808	15.00±3.065	6.08±1.396	5.96±2.015
40-49	21.29±3.576	24.07±3.547	21.89±3.582	15.40±2.853	5.75±1.084	5.52±1.705
50 and above	21.24±4.296	23.77±4.151	20.84±4.062	15.14±3.195	6.00±1.021	5.70±1.490
p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.011
Profession						
Physician	20.99±4.057	23.67±3.749	21.24±3.699	15.04±3.098	5.99±1.115	5.78±1.854
Dentist	20.31±3.910	22.36±4.122	20.69±3.668	14.74±2.696	6.19±1.177	5.82±1.479
Nurse / Midwife	20.40±3.672	22.80±3.807	21.33±3.737	14.77±2.725	5.58±1.146	5.51±1.674
Dietician /Psychologist/ Social worker/ Child development specialist	22.23±4.206	25.84±2.703	22.00±2.309	16.23±3.295	6.15±1.068	4.72±1.009
Health technician / Health officer (Anaesthesia-radiology-laboratory-Emergency medical Technician - paramedic-mouth and dental health-medical secretary	18.95±3.614	20.92±3.769	19.31±3.340	13.95±2.660	6.20±1.179	6.17±1.530
p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001
Education level						
High school/Associate degree	18.80±3.582	20.93±4.128	19.53±4.362	13.88±2.860	6.02±1.068	5.67±1.438
Licence	19.76±3.520	22.23±3.848	20.46±3.446	14.35±2.630	5.79±1.203	5.73±1.700
Master's degree	20.75±4.100	22.80±3.980	21.28±3.577	15.01±2.756	6.12±1.186	5.77±1.607
PhD/Medical speciality/ Dentist speciality	20.92±4.121	23.60±3.841	20.95±3.869	15.04±3.189	5.98±1.114	5.77±1.791
p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.092

A statistically significant relationship was identified between perceptions of service quality and demographic variables such as gender, marital status, age, occupation, and educational level ($p < 0.05$). The analysis of mean squares showed that men (M = 20.81, SD = 4.068) and higher perceptions of service quality than women; married people (M = 21.13, SD = 3.656) had higher scores than single people; people aged 40-49 years (M = 21.29, SD = 3.576) did better than other people of other ages; people working in health sciences (M = 22.23, SD = 4.206) did better than people in other fields; and people with doctoral degrees (M = 20.92, SD = 4.121) scored higher than individuals with lesser educational qualifications.

Significant differences were also observed in perceptions of safety and security relative to marital status, age, occupation, and educational level ($p < 0.05$). Married individuals (M = 23.66, SD = 3.836) rated safety and security higher than single individuals; those within the 40-49 age category (M = 24.07, SD = 3.547) achieved higher scores compared to other age groups; health sciences undergraduates (M = 25.84, SD = 2.703) exceeded the scores of

other professional categories; and individuals with doctoral degrees (M = 23.60, SD = 3.841) outperformed those with different educational backgrounds.

Concerning cost perceptions, significant variations were noted with respect to marital status, age, occupation, and educational status ($p < 0.05$). Married participants (M = 21.49, SD = 3.564) exhibited higher cost perceptions than single ones; individuals aged 40-49 years (M = 21.89, SD = 3.582) scored higher than those from other age brackets; physicians (M = 21.24, SD = 3.699) ranked higher than individuals in other occupations; and those with a master's degree (M = 21.28, SD = 3.577) rated the cost aspects more favorably than those with different levels of education.

Furthermore, there were significant differences in perceptions of tourism opportunities based on gender, marital status, age, occupation, and educational status ($p < 0.05$). Men (M = 15.00, SD = 3.381), married individuals (M = 15.06, SD = 2.977), those in the 40-49 age range (M = 15.40, SD = 2.853), health sciences undergraduates (M = 16.23, SD = 3.295), and individuals with doctoral-level education (M = 15.04, SD = 3.189) reported higher mean scores than their respective counterparts.

Significant variations were noted in hygiene level perceptions associated with marital status, age, occupation, and educational status ($p < 0.05$). Single individuals (M = 6.14, SD = 1.156), those aged over 50 (M = 6.00, SD = 1.021), health officers and health technicians (M = 6.20, SD = 1.179), and individuals with a master's degree (same mean and standard deviation as single individuals; possibly an error or oversight in data entry) reported higher scores compared to other groups.

Lastly, accessibility perceptions demonstrated statistically significant differences based on age and occupation ($p < 0.05$), with individuals aged 30-39 years (M = 5.96, SD = 2.015) and health officers and health technicians (M = 6.17, SD = 1.530) reporting higher scores than other demographic groups Table 4.

Table 5. Correlation analysis results.

Dimensions	Correlation/ Significance level	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Service quality	r p	1	0.672 0.000	0.520 0.000	0.177 0.000	0.451 0.000	0.156 0.000
2. Safety and security	r p		1	0.616 0.000	0.496 0.000	0.139 0.000	0.157 0.000
3. Cost	r p			1	0.538 0.000	0.163 0.000	0.250 0.000
4. Tourism opportunities	r p				1	0.293 0.000	0.328 0.000
5. Hygiene level	r p					1	0.179 0.000
6. Accessibility	r p						1

When the correlation analysis results were analysed, it was found that there was a statistically significant ($p<0.001$) and positive relationship between the sub-dimensions of the medical tourism scale Table 5.

4. DISCUSSION

The advancement of health and information technologies has significantly increased consumer awareness of worldwide medical treatments. Additionally, the emergence of new opportunities and alternatives has expanded destination choices for these consumers. In recent years, Türkiye has established itself as a notable destination in the medical tourism market. This recognition stems from its appealing tourism opportunities, cost-effective services, high-quality healthcare, extensive transportation networks, and accredited health institutions. These factors have contributed to Türkiye's rising prominence as a globally preferred destination for medical tourists.

As a result of the study, medical tourism scale service quality sub-dimension score 20,340±3,921, safety and security sub-dimension score 22,690±3,912, cost sub-dimension score 20,810±3,972, tourism opportunities sub-dimension score 14,730±2,861, hygiene sub-dimension score 5,970±1,173, accessibility sub-dimension score 5,750±1,164 total scale score 94,270±12,751. According to these results, it can be said that Türkiye's medical tourism image is considered to be high. According to the studies conducted in the literature, Türkiye is shown as one of the top ten destinations in the world for medical tourism (Collins, Medhekar, & Şanal, 2022; Dalen & Alpert, 2019; Farrukh et al., 2022; Kılavuz, 2018; Yılmaz & Aktas, 2021). Türkiye ranks 44th among 136 countries in the travel and tourism competitiveness ranking conducted in 2017. Türkiye scored the highest in factors, such as price (cost), health and hygiene, tourism service infrastructure, and air transport infrastructure (World Economic Forum, 2017). Considering the cost advantages offered to patients by countries offering medical tourism services worldwide, it is seen that patients can be treated with less cost in Costa Rica 45-65%, India 65-90%, Malaysia 65-80%, Singapore 25-40%, Thailand 50-75%, Mexico 40-65%, Brazil 20-30% and Türkiye 50-65% (Patients beyond borders, 2023). These results may indicate that Türkiye provides a significant cost advantage compared to other countries. Therefore, it is of great importance for Türkiye to emphasise in its promotional and marketing activities that it provides quality healthcare services at an affordable cost. In the studies conducted in the literature, it is known that medical tourists also prefer India due to its cost advantage. However, these studies state that India and Thailand are not at a sufficient level regarding hygiene (Akbolat & Deniz, 2017; Bostan, 2016; Cham et al., 2021; Cooper & Buckley, 2022). Therefore, Türkiye stands out in both of these factors, giving Türkiye a competitive advantage over its rivals.

Moghavvemi et al. (2017) indicate that travel in medical tourism is mainly based on holiday destinations (Moghavvemi et al., 2017). Hall (2012) states that medical tourists prefer touristic destinations with developed tourism infrastructure because they want to participate in tourism activities as well as medical treatment (Hall, 2012). According to 2023 tourism data, Istanbul and Antalya provinces from Türkiye are among the top ten cities attracting the most visitors in the world (Travelness.com, 2023). Istanbul is recognised as one of the best cultural tourism destinations in the world, located between Asia and Europe. In recent years, this city has come to the forefront with the health investments made in Istanbul. Especially many internationally accredited hospitals are located in this city. In addition, there are direct flights from all over the world to the newly built Istanbul airport. This makes it easier to make daily medical visits (TUİK, 2023). Moreover, in Bulgaria, which is located in a close geographical location, many patients prefer Istanbul for daily treatment. Thanks to its warm climate, Antalya is one of the most preferred destinations, especially by citizens of countries such as Russia, Germany, Poland, and England. Antalya also has an international airport with flights from all over the world. In 2023, Antalya broke an all-time record by hosting 15 million, 371 thousand tourists. In addition, Antalya has greatly improved its health infrastructure with the health transformation programme. Moreover, many internationally accredited health institutions operate in Antalya (Travelness.com, 2023; TUİK, 2023; Turob.com, 2023). For this reason, Türkiye, which has a vital tourism infrastructure and transport network, is preferred by medical tourists (Fetscherin & Stephano, 2016).

As a result of the study, a positive relationship was found between service quality, safety and security, cost, tourism opportunities, hygiene level, and accessibility. In a study conducted by Yıldız and Khan (2019) on Arab medical tourists who prefer Türkiye, healthcare service quality, cost savings, regional proximity, and availability of experienced healthcare professionals were found to be the most essential factors in choosing a destination (Yıldız & Khan, 2019). In a study conducted by Üstün and Uslu (2022) using the interview technique, the attractive factors for choosing Türkiye as a medical tourism destination were determined as physical and cultural proximity, reasonable cost, visa facilities, and accessibility (Üstün & Uslu, 2022). In the study conducted by Çalhan and Arıcı (2022), it was determined that Türkiye is superior to other countries in terms of being cheaper than its competitors as a medical tourism destination, geographical proximity, and accessibility factors (Çalhan & Arıcı, 2022). In the

study conducted by Sevim and Sevim (2019) with 284 medical tourists, service quality, modernity of the selected institution, and tourism opportunities offered by Türkiye were found to be the factors with the highest average in medical tourism destination selection (Sevim & Sevim, 2019). Based on these results, it can be said that the six factors we discussed in the study are important in the choice of medical tourism. Türkiye has been attracting a lot of medical tourists in recent years due to its unique natural beauty, the investments it has made in the field of health in recent years, and the fact that it is considerably cheaper than other countries. Therefore, it can be said that this number will increase day by day with more effective and efficient marketing and promotion activities.

5. CONCLUSION

Determining the capacity of Türkiye in the realm of medical tourism and identifying distinct market segments will shed light on the country's strategic tourism goals and offer critical insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and tour operators. This analysis facilitates the segmentation of the medical tourism industry into categorically distinct groups, which, in turn, allows for the formulation of targeted marketing strategies. In the context of healthcare services—where consumers exhibit significant risk aversion—the development of marketing tactics tailored to homogenous groups with analogous characteristics and needs becomes imperative. The implications of service failure in medical tourism extend beyond typical consumer dissatisfaction, given the critical nature of healthcare services.

Moreover, recent advancements and achievements have positioned Türkiye as a prominent figure in the international medical tourism sector. Despite a temporary setback due to the global pandemic, the influx of medical tourists to Türkiye has demonstrated a resilient upward trajectory. The nation boasts a robust infrastructure for medical tourism, characterized by internationally accredited medical facilities, a cadre of highly skilled healthcare professionals, state-of-the-art medical technology, and competitively priced services. Despite these strengths, it is posited that Türkiye's current share in the global medical tourism market does not reflect its full potential.

Medical tourism developments are pretty noticeable in terms of legal infrastructure and practice. Some necessary steps that need to be taken for Türkiye to reach a leading position in the medical tourism sector by maintaining its competitive power are related to the relevant laws and practices. Türkiye's strategic geographical location, the availability of specialised healthcare professionals, quality healthcare services at affordable prices, short waiting times, and access to the latest medical technology and treatment methods provide significant benefits in the field of medical tourism. Thanks to these advantages, Türkiye is ready to make a big leap in the field of medical tourism.

The strategic importance of the medical tourism industry and its capacity to develop an economic driver such as tourism are outstanding. To make the best use of Türkiye's existing capacity and potential, removing bureaucratic barriers that hinder the international development of the sector should be a priority. To this end, the government and policymakers need to coordinate medical tourism in Türkiye in cooperation with the private sector. As in the tourism sector and other fields, it is crucial for businesses to focus on promotional and marketing activities to gain a larger market share and to be competitive. Promotional activities can influence potential customers and affect their purchasing decisions, i.e., behavioural intentions. Therefore, the promotion and information about medical tourism services should be carried out effectively.

In promotional activities, it is vital to emphasise Türkiye's strengths in the field of medical tourism. Based on the results obtained from this study, service quality, hygiene quality, and accessibility should be emphasised and promoted. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that Türkiye's tourism capacity is conducive to medical tourism. Subsequently, information on cost-effectiveness and environmental advantages should be provided.

In the field of tourism, where we are highly effective in developing medical tourism and have a competitive advantage, it would be useful to consider the triad of sea, sand, and sun together. Moreover, organising package tours, including medical treatments for tourists visiting the Mediterranean and Aegean regions, which are the most

prominent tourism destinations in Türkiye, is of great importance in terms of its medical tourism image. Medical tourists from developed countries attach great importance to the quality of health services, standards, and accreditations. By focusing on medical tourists who will receive health services for the first time in medical tourism, medical tourists should be encouraged to turn into loyal customers. In this way, the continuity of service demand should be ensured and aimed at recommended health institutions in Türkiye. In this sense, it is of great importance that the health personnel be qualified and competent, have communication skills, and, most importantly, overcome the foreign language problem. In addition, raising awareness by providing medical tourism training to healthcare professionals is very important in terms of image.

Last but not least, the concept of medical tourism image has a crucial role in shaping behavioural intentions, as viewed by both healthcare professionals and medical tourists. Policy planners have a responsibility to prioritise the development of a positive reputation for medical tourism locations, as this plays a crucial role in increasing tourist demand. Furthermore, this favourable perception plays a crucial role in improving the perception of potential hazards, therefore increasing the desire to travel. Thus, individuals involved in this industry must create and execute inventive initiatives and tactics that directly target perceptions of risk and the image of the destination, aiming to sustain a competitive position in the market and achieve the expected financial results.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Medical tourism provides a significant economic gain for developing countries. In addition, thanks to medical tourism, qualified healthcare professionals earn more economic gains and offer new job opportunities to other individuals. For this reason, in this study, Türkiye's medical tourism image was evaluated from the perspective of health personnel, unlike other studies. The most important conclusion of the study is that service quality, safety and security, cost, tourism opportunities, hygiene, and accessibility are essential factors for the image of medical tourism. Moreover, it is determined that Türkiye, which is at the forefront of the world, especially in tourism activities, will be more prominent in medical tourism when combining tourism opportunities with medical tourism.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.
Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, Turkey has granted approval for this study on 7 September 2022 (Ref. No. 2022/07-09).
Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.
Data Availability Statement: The corresponding author can provide the supporting data of this study upon a reasonable request.
Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

Akbolat, M., & Deniz, N. G. (2017). Development of medical tourism in Turkey and comparison with some countries. *Uluslararası Global Turizm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, *1*(2), 123-139.

Bostan, S. (2016). Factors affecting health tourists' choice of medical destinationer. *Journal of International Social Research*, *9*(43), 1729–1729. https://doi.org/10.17719/jisr.20164317741

Çalhan, H., & Arıcı, A. (2022). Evaluation of medical tourism as a touristic product. *Türk Turizm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, *6*(4), 1091-1112. https://doi.org/10.26677/TR1010.2022.1140

Çapar, H., & Aslan, Ö. (2020). Factors affecting destination choice in medical tourism. *International Journal of Travel Medicine and Global Health*, *8*(2), 80-88. https://doi.org/10.34172/ijtmgh.2020.13

Cham, T.-H., Lim, Y.-M., Sia, B.-C., Cheah, J.-H., & Ting, H. (2021). Medical tourism destination image and its relationship with the intention to revisit: A study of chinese medical tourists in Malaysia. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, *17*(2), 163–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/19388160.2020.1734514

Collins, A., Medhekar, A., & Şanal, Z. G. (2022). A qualitative analysis of Turkish stakeholders perspective for improving medical tourism. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *24*(3), 487–500. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2516

Cooper, M.-A., & Buckley, R. (2022). Tourist mental health drives destination choice, marketing, and matching. *Journal of Travel Research*, *61*(4), 786–799. https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875211011548

Dalen, J. E., & Alpert, J. S. (2019). Medical tourists: Incoming and outgoing. *The American Journal of Medicine*, *132*(1), 9–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2018.06.022

Farrukh, M., Shahzad, I. A., Sajid, M., Sheikh, M. F., & Alam, I. (2022). Revisiting the intention to travel framework in the perspective of medical tourism: The role of eWord-of-mouth and destination image. *International Journal of Healthcare Management*, *15*(1), 28–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/20479700.2020.1836733

Fetscherin, M., & Stephano, R.-M. (2016). The medical tourism index: Scale development and validation. *Tourism Management*, *52*, 539–556. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.08.010

General Directorate of Health Services. (2020). *Health statistics yearbook*. Retrieved from Https://Dosyasb.Saglik.Gov.Tr/Eklenti/43400/0/Siy2020-Eng-26052022pdf.Pdf

Gürbüz, S., & Şahin, F. (2018). *Research methods in social sciences philosophy – method – analysis* (5th ed.). Ankara: Seckin Publishing.

Habibi, A., Mousavi, M., Jamali, S. M., & Ale Ebrahim, N. (2022). A bibliometric study of medical tourism. *Anatolia*, *33*(3), 415–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2021.1954042

Hall, C. M. (2012). *Medical tourism*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203109458.

Healthturkiye. (2023). *Health Turkiye*. Retrieved from https://www.healthturkiye.com

Jotikasthira, N. (2010). *Salient factors influencing medical tourism destination choice*. Retrieved from Https://Researchportal.Scu.Edu.Au/Esploro/Outputs/Doctoral/Salient-Factors-Influencing-Medical-Tourism-Destination/991012820928502368

Khan, M. J., Chelliah, S., & Haron, M. S. (2016). Medical tourism destination image formation process: A conceptual model. *International Journal of Healthcare Management*, *9*(2), 134–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/20479700.2016.1142046

Kılavuz, E. (2018). Medical tourism competition: The case of Turkey. *International Journal of Health Management and Tourism*, *3*(1), 42–58. https://doi.org/10.31201/ijhmt.372364

Kodalak, O., & Baltaci, M. (2022). Medical tourism in Türkiye and the world. *Avrasya Turizm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, *3*(2), 81-91. https://doi.org/10.58830/ozgur.pub257.c1290

Küçükali, H., Palteki, A. S., Dündar Ege, Ş., & Hayran, O. E. (2022). Perspective, needs and expectations of healthcare providers for medical tourism policy: A qualitative review. *Hacettepe Sağlık İdaresi Dergisi*, *25*(1), 99–126.

Moghavvemi, S., Ormond, M., Musa, G., Isa, C. R. M., Thirumoorthi, T., Mustapha, M. Z. B., & Chandy, J. J. C. (2017). Connecting with prospective medical tourists online: A cross-sectional analysis of private hospital websites promoting medical tourism in India, Malaysia and Thailand. *Tourism Management*, *58*, 154-163. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.10.010

Patientsbeyondborders. (2023). *Patients beyond borders price*. Retrieved from Https://Www.Patientsbeyondborders.Com/Media

Rahman, I., Martin, D. S., & Liu, S. (2022). Outbound medical tourists: The interplay of perceived quality, length of stay, group-size, post-visit destination image and revisit intention. *PLOS One*, *17*(5), e0267755. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0267755

Sag, I., & Zengul, F. D. (2019). Why medical tourists choose Turkey as a medical tourism destination? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, *2*(3), 296–306. https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTI-05-2018-0031

Sevim, E., & Sevim, E. (2019). Examining the factors affecting medical tourism preference: Türkiye example. *Hacettepe Sağlık İdaresi Dergisi*, *22*(3), 633-652. https://doi.org/10.26677/tr1010.2019.135

Tapia, J., Dieste, M., Royo, E., & Calvo, E. (2022). Factors affecting the choice of medical tourism destination: Spain as a host country. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, *23*(1), 115-138. https://doi.org/10.1080/1528008X.2020.1848749

Tengilimoğlu, D. (2021). Health tourism and government incentives. *Journal of Life Economics*, *8*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.15637/jlecon.8.1.01

Tosun, N., Demir, Y., & Sağlık, E. (2020). Traditional and complementary medicine from health tourism perspective. *International Journal of Health Management and Tourism*, *5*(1), 32-43. https://doi.org/10.31201/ijhmt.694384

Travelness.com. (2023). *Top 20 most visited cities in the world*. Retrieved from Https://Travelness.Com/Most-Visited-Cities-in-the-World

TUİK. (2023). *Tourism statistics*. Retrieved from Https://Data.Tuik.Gov.Tr/Bulten/Index?P=Turizm-Istatistikleri-III.-Ceyrek:-Temmuz---Eylul,-2023-49604

Turob.com. (2023). *Antalya tourism statistics*. Retrieved from Https://Www.Turob.Com/Tr/Bilgi-Merkezi/Istatistikler/2023/Show/1219/Aralik-2023-Antalya-Turizm-Istatistikleri

USHAŞ. (2023). *Health tourism data*. Retrieved from Https://Www.Ushas.Com.Tr/Saglik-Turizmi-Verileri/

Üstün, U., & Uslu, Y. D. (2022). A study on the reasons why Turkey is preferred in health tourism: Medical tourism index. *Avrupa Bilim ve Teknoloji Dergisi*(33), 344-353. https://doi.org/10.31590/ejosat.1020647

World Economic Forum. (2017). *Report*. Retrieved from Reports.Weforum.Org/Travel-and-Tourism- Competitiveness-Report-2017/Country-Profiles/#economy=IND:

Yıldız, M. S., & Khan, M. M. (2019). Factors affecting the choice of medical tourism destination: A case study of medical tourists from the Arab Region in Turkey. *Journal of Health Management*, *21*(4), 465-475. https://doi.org/10.1177/0972063419884396

Yılmaz, V., & Aktas, P. (2021). The making of a global medical tourism destination: From state-supported privatisation to state entrepreneurialism in healthcare in Turkey. *Global Social Policy*, *21*(2), 301-318. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018120981423