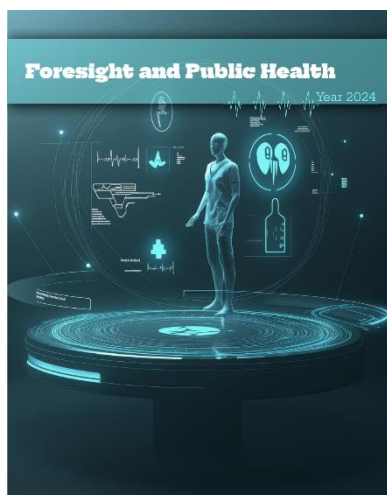


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Health Tourism Development: An Insightful Analysis of Iran's Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Health tourism is a dynamic global phenomenon; however, notable knowledge gaps remain concerning its development in emerging nations characterized by unique geopolitical and economic contexts. This research investigates the development of health tourism in Iran through a qualitative methodology, employing semi-structured interviews with 23 experts, comprising 9 healthcare providers, 8 tourism facilitators, and 6 representatives from regulatory bodies. We employed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework for thematic analysis. The findings revealed three primary themes derived from the 45 codes: (1) strategic positioning considerations, which include healthcare service excellence, cost advantage, and destination appeal; (2) operational challenges and solutions, addressing regulatory barriers, service delivery gaps, and marketing and reputation management; and (3) imperatives of innovation and sustainability, including technology integration, ecosystem development, and quality and sustainability frameworks. Iran exhibits considerable potential due to its specialized medical expertise and competitive pricing, notwithstanding the challenges posed by international sanctions and prevailing perception issues. The integrated framework of the study demonstrates the interrelationships among these dimensions, enhancing both theoretical comprehension of emerging destination development and practical implementation strategies. Future research should integrate quantitative methods, undertake longitudinal studies to assess the impacts of technological innovation, conduct comparative analyses with regional competitors, and explore outcomes that prioritize patients from the perspectives of international health tourists. This analysis examines the interplay between geopolitical constraints and healthcare service delivery, providing insights for stakeholders in healthcare, tourism, and regulatory sectors.

Keywords: Health Tourism, Iran, Thematic analysis, Healthcare Innovation, Strategic Development

Introduction

The worldwide healthcare landscape is experiencing a revolutionary transition, with health tourism emerging as a dynamic and increasingly vital industry within the worldwide medical and tourism industries (Najafipour et al., 2019; Soliman et al., 2024; Wong & Neo, 2025). Health tourism, a complicated phenomenon that includes medical treatments, wellness experiences, and therapeutic interventions, signifies an intricate convergence of healthcare delivery, economic prospects, and cross-cultural interchange (Agudaru & Taran, 2023; Foroozanfar et al., 2024; Saadati, 2025). Despite comprehensive study on global health tourism trends, substantial knowledge gaps remain, especially regarding the

intricate development strategies for developing nations with distinct geopolitical and economic circumstances (Karimzadeh et al., 2025; Longo & Saadati, 2025; Mardaninejad & Najmi, 2024).

Current literature on health tourism has primarily concentrated on established destinations like Thailand, India, and Malaysia, resulting in significant gaps in the analysis of growing economies with unique difficulties and potential (Hosseini et al., 2015; Meimand et al., 2017; Toktas, 2024). Prior research has predominantly analyzed health tourism from economic and marketing perspectives, frequently neglecting the intricate interplay between technological innovation, cultural dynamics, and geopolitical limitations that influence a destination's competitive standing (Foroozanfar, Imanipour, et al., 2025; Marin-Pantelescu et al., 2021; Saadatizadeh, 2024). The existing body of research reveals numerous significant deficiencies. Most current studies either utilize a solely economic viewpoint or a limited medical services framework, neglecting to deliver a holistic ecosystem analysis that encompasses several dimensions, including healthcare, tourism, technological innovation, and regulatory structures (Dehghani et al., 2021; Najafipour et al., 2019). Insufficient focus has been directed towards the distinct hurdles encountered by nations functioning within intricate geopolitical contexts, including international sanctions, regional political dynamics, and cultural perception obstacles (Azimi Nojadeh et al., 2025; Foroozanfar, Wang, et al., 2025). Despite the ongoing digital shift in global healthcare delivery, there is a scarcity of comprehensive research examining how emerging markets might utilize technological advances to surmount conventional market entrance obstacles (Esenyel et al., 2015; Mousavi et al., 2016; Soliman et al., 2024). The current research is deficient in thorough examination of the complex interrelations and cooperative frameworks among healthcare providers, tourism facilitators, regulatory authorities, and technology developers. This paper fills significant gaps by providing an innovative and thorough examination of health tourism development in Iran. The study offers unique contributions in multiple aspects. This research utilizes a qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with several stakeholder groups, offering a unique, multi-faceted insight into the difficulties and potential in health tourism development. This study presents a new conceptual framework that combines strategic positioning elements, operational difficulties, and innovation requirements, providing a reproducible tool for evaluating health tourism potential in intricate market contexts. Moreover, through comprehensive examination of digital innovation, technological integration, and strategic positioning, the research offers practical lessons for locations aiming to cultivate competitive health tourism sectors. The paper offers a detailed analysis of how geopolitical restrictions, international sanctions, and cultural dynamics influence the development of health tourism, surpassing basic economic evaluations. The study addresses the need from researchers such as Esenyel et al. (2015); Hosseini et al. (2015) for more thorough methodologies to comprehend health tourism advancement in emerging countries. This paper examines Iran, a nation with sophisticated medical skills, competitive pricing, and a rich cultural legacy, presenting a strong case for market potential and strategic development within a complex geopolitical framework. Additionally, this study deficit is especially evident in Iran, a nation with significant but predominantly unexploited potential in the global health tourism sector.

The study aims to fulfill the following objectives, informed by identified research gaps and theoretical frameworks: Conduct a thorough assessment of the current health tourism framework in Iran. Identify the strategic advantages and operational challenges associated with the development of a competitive health tourism sector. Analyze the effects of technological advancements on overcoming barriers to market entry. Develop an integrated framework to enhance strategic health tourism within involved market environments. Provide practical recommendations for stakeholders in the healthcare, tourism, and regulatory sectors.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study utilized a qualitative approach with an interpretive methodology to thoroughly examine the present condition and future potential of health tourism in Iran. A qualitative method was selected since it enables researchers to get profound insights into complex challenges within real-world contexts, facilitating the collection of comprehensive perspectives from key stakeholders in health tourism (Clarke & Braun, 2021). This methodology is especially

appropriate for examining nascent markets such as health tourism in Iran, where contextual elements and stakeholder perspectives are essential for comprehending market dynamics and developmental prospects. This study's statistical population comprised 23 senior experts from three major sectors within Iran's health tourism ecosystem. The initial segment comprises 9 healthcare providers who serve as managers of hospitals, specialty clinics, and medical institutions catering to international patients. The second segment consists of 8 tourism facilitators who handle travel companies, lodging services, and specialist health tourism providers. The third section comprises 6 regulatory bodies representing pertinent governmental departments and organizations that supervise health tourism growth. Figure 1 depicts these three main segments of participants. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure the intentional selection of participants possessing substantial expertise and experience in health tourism operations. The criteria for participant selection mandated at least five years of expertise in their respective fields and direct engagement in health tourism activities. Participants who operate at the intersection of healthcare and tourism were meticulously selected, as they are crucial in linking overseas patients with local healthcare services.

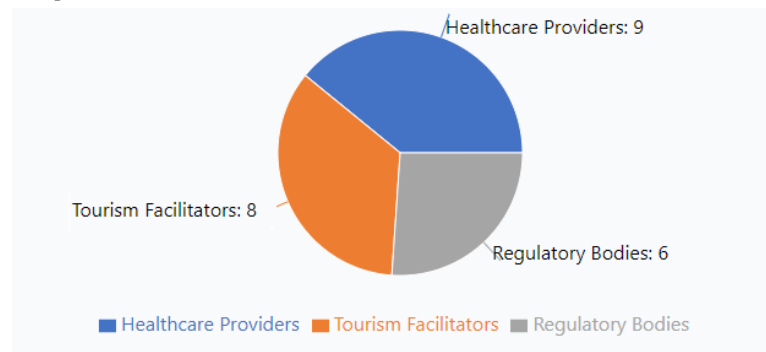


Figure 1. Three main sectors of participants

Data Collection

The principal data collection method used semi-structured interviews conducted from January to April 2025. The interview protocol was established in accordance with [Castillo-Montoya \(2016\)](#) paradigm, which underscores the necessity of aligning interview questions with research objectives. Prior to implementation, the procedure underwent validation by a panel of three experts in health tourism and qualitative research methods. Interview sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed. We back-translated a selection of transcripts to verify translation accuracy.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis served as the principal analytical method, adhering to the six-step framework established by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), which is extensively utilized in qualitative research ([Clarke & Braun, 2021](#)). The analytical procedure followed three sequential stages describing in Table 1. Atlas.ti software enabled the methodical arrangement, coding, and display of the analytical procedure. The test-retest approach employed the Holsti method for assessing reliability. Three randomly selected interviews were independently coded by two researchers, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.8, surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.7 ([Holsti, 1969](#)), so affirming the trustworthiness of the coding method.:

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Methodology framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006)

Stage	Step	Description
1. Analyzing and Describing the Text	1. Familiarization with data	Two researchers independently reviewed interview transcripts.
	2. Generating initial codes	Significant data was coded systematically to produce initial codes.
	3. Searching for themes	Clustered related codes into potential themes. Examined code co-occurrence patterns and identified conceptual relationships between codes.
2. Describing and Interpreting the Text	4. Reviewing themes	Checked themes against coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure coherence and representativeness.
3. Combining and integrating	5. Defining and naming themes	The themes were refined through an analysis of their scope and content. Developed clear definitions for each theme to connect themes to Iran's health tourism ecosystem.
	6. Producing the report	Synthesized analysis into scholarly report. Incorporated extract examples illustrating key themes.

Findings and Results

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This study involved 23 experts from the health tourism sector in Iran. The sample included 15 males (65.2%) and 8 females (34.8%), with ages spanning from 32 to 57 years. A significant proportion of participants (52.2%) were aged 40-49, with 30.4% in the 30-39 age range and 17.4% aged 50 and above. Nine participants (39.1%) were healthcare providers, eight participants (34.8%) were from tourism facilitation organizations, and six participants (26.1%) were affiliated with regulatory bodies. The mean industry experience of participants was 8.5 years, with 13 participants (56.5%) possessing over 8 years of experience in health tourism-related activities. In terms of educational qualifications, 18 participants (78.3%) held postgraduate degrees, while 5 participants (21.7%) got doctoral degrees in medicine, healthcare administration, or tourism studies. Figure 2 illustrates the distributions of gender and age, whereas Figure 3 presents the educational background and experience of the participants. The varied backgrounds of participants provided extensive insights into the complex nature of health tourism development in Iran.

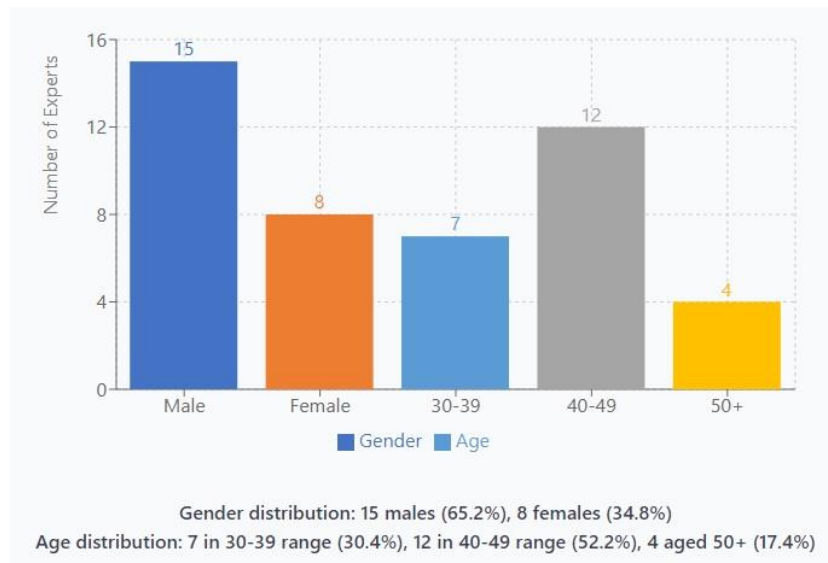


Figure 2. Gender and age distributions

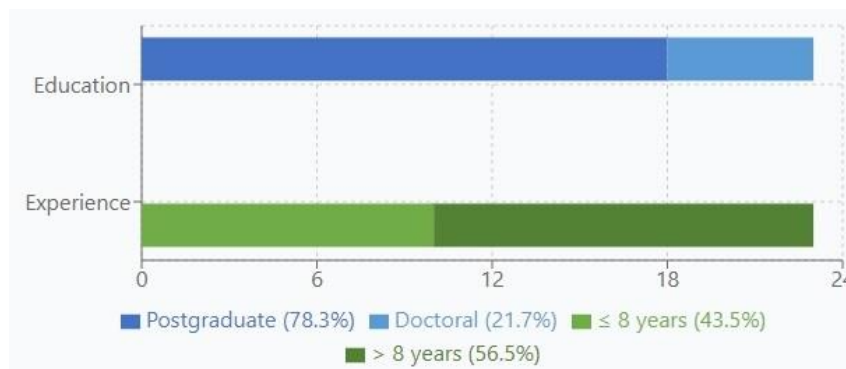


Figure 3. Educational background and experience of the participants

Thematic Analysis findings

The thematic analysis of interview data identified three main themes distinguishing the present condition and future potential of health tourism in Iran: 1) strategic positioning considerations, 2) operational challenges and solutions, and 3) imperatives of innovation and sustainability. The integration of numerous subthemes and primary themes (codes)

within each main theme achieves a comprehensive comprehension of Iran's health tourism ecosystem. Table 2 delineates the logical structure of themes discovered by this study.

Table 2. Thematic Structure of Health Tourism Development in Iran

No	Code (primary theme)	Subtheme	Main Theme	
1	Specialized medical expertise	Healthcare service excellence	Strategic positioning considerations	
2	Advanced medical technology			
3	International accreditation status			
4	Specialized treatment centers	Cost advantage		
5	Comprehensive medical services			
6	Price competitiveness			
7	Favorable currency exchange rates			
8	Affordable accommodation options			
9	Inclusive healthcare packages	Destination appeal		
10	Cost-effective pharmaceutical products			
11	Rich cultural heritage			
12	Geographical proximity to regional markets			
13	Natural therapeutic resources			
14	Religious and cultural affinity with neighbors	Regulatory barriers	Operational challenges and solutions	
15	Seasonal climate diversity			
16	Visa and travel restrictions			
17	Financial transaction limitations			
18	International sanctions impact			
19	Complex administrative processes	Service delivery gaps		
20	Licensing requirements for international patients			
21	Language barriers			
22	Inconsistent service quality			
23	Limited specialized interpreter services			
24	Inadequate post-treatment follow-up	Marketing and reputation management		
25	Coordination gaps between healthcare and tourism sectors			
26	International perception issues			
27	Limited digital presence			
28	Media representation challenges			
29	Absence of cohesive branding strategy	Technology integration	Imperatives of innovation and sustainability	
30	Insufficient market research			
31	Digital patient engagement platforms			
32	Telemedicine consultation services			
33	AI-powered diagnosis support	Ecosystem development		
34	Electronic medical record systems			
35	Virtual reality facility tours			
36	Specialized healthcare corridors			
37	International healthcare partnerships	Quality and sustainability frameworks		
38	Health tourism education programs			
39	Medical tourism facilitator networks			
40	Public-private collaboration models			
41	Sustainable healthcare practices			
42	International quality certification			
43	Patient-centered care approaches			
44	Evidence-based outcome reporting			
45	Ethical treatment protocol standardization			

Utilizing the thematic analysis framework developed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), the subsequent subsections provide a comprehensive examination of each primary theme, accompanied by representative quotes from study participants.

Strategic positioning considerations

The first main theme, strategic positioning considerations, includes the distinctive advantages and positioning factors that characterize Iran's competitiveness in the global health tourism market. This theme includes three subthemes: healthcare services excellence, cost advantages, and the destination appeal.

Healthcare service excellence

Participants consistently pointed out Iran's advanced medical capabilities as a key strength in attracting international patients. The nation's specialized medical expertise, especially in areas like fertility treatments, stem cell therapy, organ transplantation, cosmetic surgery, and cardiovascular interventions, is often cited as a significant competitive advantage. A hospital administrator remarked, "Our cardiac surgeons are executing procedures on par with

leading centers in Europe, yet at a significantly lower cost. A significant number of our specialists have received training at esteemed international institutions and have returned with the most current techniques." (Participant 4, Healthcare Provider).

Participants identified advanced medical technology in major urban centers as a significant factor in the development of health tourism. One participant stated, "In Tehran and several other cities, we possess diagnostic and treatment equipment that adheres to international standards." The primary challenge lies not in our technological capabilities but in raising awareness among potential patients regarding these capabilities." (Participant 11, Healthcare Provider).

Several participants observed that international accreditation is limited among Iranian healthcare facilities, impacting their credibility in global markets. A representative from a regulatory body noted, "Fewer than 15% of hospitals equipped to serve international patients have secured JCI (Joint Commission International) or other recognized international authorizations. This situation presents a significant obstacle to establishing trust with prospective patients from certain regions and countries." (Participant 19, regulatory body).

Cost advantage

The notable price disparity for medical procedures in Iran relative to other nations and certain regional competitors has become a key competitive advantage. This cost advantage encompasses not only medical procedures but also accommodation, transportation, and pharmaceutical products. "Patients can save 60-80% on complex procedures such as organ transplantation or advanced cancer treatments compared to prices in European countries. In comparison to regional competitors such as Turkey, we uphold a price advantage of 25-30%." (Participant 3, Healthcare Provider).

We recognized that the favorable currency exchange rates resulting from economic conditions further enhance this cost benefit. "The present exchange rate conditions establish a notably advantageous context for the pricing of healthcare services. Premium private hospitals can provide world-class treatments at prices that may appear astonishing to patients." (Participant 8, Tourism Facilitator).

Multiple participants noted the development of inclusive healthcare packages that integrate medical services with accommodation, transportation, translation, and tourism experiences. "We have developed comprehensive packages that encompass arrangements for airport pickup, medical consultations, procedures, recovery time, and cultural excursions." This comprehensive approach with clear pricing provides patients with assurance" (Participant 13, Tourism Facilitator).

Destination appeal

The cultural heritage, historical significance, and diverse natural attractions of Iran are frequently identified as valuable assets that enhance the country's appeal as a health tourism destination. Numerous participants highlighted the potential for integrating medical treatments with cultural experiences. "Patients recovering from procedures frequently have accompanying family members or necessitate recovery periods. Providing cultural tours to UNESCO World Heritage sites facilitates significant experiences during these times and differentiates us from solely clinical destinations." (Participant 7, Tourism Facilitator)

The close geographical location to densely populated regional markets is identified as a strategic advantage. "Our strategic location enables us to cater to the 400 million individuals residing within a three-hour flight radius of our primary urban centers. Countries such as Iraq, Azerbaijan, Oman, and Afghanistan serve as significant source markets due to their geographical proximity." (Participant 16, regulatory body).

Multiple participants emphasized Iran's natural therapeutic resources, such as mineral hot springs, salt caves, and mud therapy sites, which provide complementary wellness tourism opportunities. "The potential of our natural therapeutic resources for international health tourism is largely unexploited. The combination of wellness elements with traditional medical treatments may yield distinct value propositions for particular patient groups." (Participant 14, Tourism Facilitator).

Operational challenges and solutions

The second primary theme explores the practical barriers and implementation challenges that impact the development of health tourism in Iran, as well as potential solutions that have emerged. This theme encompasses three subthemes: regulatory barriers, service delivery gaps, and marketing and reputation management.

Regulatory barriers

International sanctions and their supplementary effects represent the primary regulatory challenge confronting Iran's health tourism sector. Participants reported challenges related to financial transactions, equipment procurement, and international collaborations. "Healthcare services may be exempt from sanctions; however, banking restrictions significantly hinder patients' ability to make payments. We have implemented alternative solutions via intermediary countries, resulting in increased complexity and diminished trust." (Participant 5, healthcare provider).

Visa processes and travel restrictions were identified as significant barriers: "The visa application process remains cumbersome for potential patients from numerous countries." Despite advancements in visa-on-arrival policies for medical purposes, considerable bureaucratic obstacles remain that discourage prospective patients." (Participant 2, tourism facilitator).

Licensing requirements for treating international patients impose additional administrative challenges that smaller facilities find difficult to manage. "Many competent medical centers are effectively barred from the health tourism market due to their inability to fulfill the extensive documentation and facility modification criteria outlined in the international patient licensing regulations." (Participant 21, regulatory body).

Service delivery gaps

Language barriers and the limited availability of specialized medical interpreters were frequently identified as operational challenges impacting patient experience: "We have excellent doctors but limited English proficiency among nursing and support staff. Medical terminology necessitates advanced language proficiency that extends beyond simple translation, resulting in a shortage of qualified medical interpreters." (Participant 9, Healthcare Provider).

Participants observed discrepancies in service quality standards across various facilities and even within the same institution: "The variance in service quality is problematic." A patient may experience high-quality surgical care yet face cumbersome administrative procedures or inadequate recovery accommodations that fail to align with international standards." (Participant 15, Tourism Facilitator).

The coordination between healthcare providers and tourism services represents a significant challenge: "There is frequently a disconnect between medical facilities and tourism infrastructure." Hospitals prioritize clinical outcomes, often neglecting the comprehensive patient journey, which encompasses accommodation, transportation, and cultural experiences." (Participant 10, Tourism Facilitator).

Marketing and reputation management

Issues related to international perception and media representation of Iran are often identified as major obstacles to attracting patients from other nations. "The portrayal of Iran in international media induces immediate reluctance among prospective patients, especially from other countries. Addressing these preconceptions necessitates the implementation of specific communication strategies and the use of testimonials from former patients" (Participant 12, Tourism Facilitator).

The inadequate digital presence of Iranian healthcare facilities represents a significant marketing deficiency: "Many of our leading hospitals possess websites that are outdated, not optimized for international audiences, or lack comprehensive information in English. The current digital-first patient journey places us at a significant disadvantage." (Participant 1, Healthcare Provider).

Multiple participants noted the lack of a cohesive national branding strategy for health tourism, stating, "In contrast to our competitors, Turkey and India, we do not possess a unified national brand for health tourism. Various organizations advocate for distinct aspects without coordination, resulting in market confusion" (Participant 22, regulatory body).

Imperatives of innovation and sustainability

The third primary theme centers on proactive initiatives and developing strategies intended to improve Iran's competitive standing in health tourism. The theme of Imperatives of Innovation and Sustainability includes three subthemes: technology integration, ecosystem development, and quality and sustainability frameworks.

Technology integration

Participants reported on several technological innovations aimed at enhancing patient engagement and operational efficiency. "A multilingual patient portal has been developed to enable international patients to consult with specialists through video calls prior to travel, securely share medical records, and obtain preliminary assessments. This digital-first strategy enhances confidence and optimizes the treatment process". (Participant 6, Healthcare Provider).

The implementation of telemedicine for pre-consultation and post-treatment follow-up represents a notable opportunity, especially in the context following the pandemic. "Remote follow-up consultations are increasingly accepted by patients and physicians alike. This technology facilitates the continuation of the doctor-patient relationship post-discharge, enhancing trust and potentially resulting in referrals." (Participant 3, Healthcare Provider).

Virtual reality facility tours have been identified as an innovative tool for the marketing of healthcare facilities. "Prospective patients can now engage in virtual tours of our hospital, allowing them to view the rooms, operating theaters, and equipment prior to making a decision. This transparency mitigates the uncertainty linked to pursuing treatment in an unfamiliar setting." (Participant 9, Healthcare Provider).

Ecosystem development

Specialized healthcare corridors that concentrate on particular treatments represent a strategic method for advancing health tourism. "This approach emphasizes the creation of geographical clusters of facilities dedicated to specific areas such as fertility, cosmetic surgery, or dental care, accompanied by tailored supporting services to enhance patient experiences." (Participant 20, regulatory body).

The establishment of medical tourism facilitator networks has become a vital component in optimizing patient pathways. "Professional facilitators with expertise in healthcare processes and hospitality requirements act as a crucial link between international patients and the healthcare system. They address cultural differences, language barriers, and administrative complexities." (Participant 13, Tourism Facilitator).

Models of public-private collaboration are crucial for tackling systemic challenges: "The most effective initiatives observed involve cooperation among government entities offering regulatory support and infrastructure, private hospitals ensuring clinical excellence, and tourism operators providing hospitality expertise." (Participant 18, regulatory body).

Quality and sustainability frameworks

The implementation of international quality certification programs has been prioritized to enhance credibility: "We are promoting the pursuit of international accreditations such as JCI, while also developing a national certification standard for health tourism that considers Iran-specific contexts and aligns with international expectations." (Participant 23, regulatory body).

Evidence-based outcome reporting is identified as a developing practice to foster trust with prospective patients: "Disclosing our success rates, complication rates, and patient satisfaction metrics enhances transparency, addressing perception challenges. Empirical evidence is more persuasive than promotional assertions regarding quality". (Participant 4, Healthcare Provider).

Multiple participants brought up the importance of patient-centered care strategies that consider cultural variations: "We are educating our staff to comprehend the cultural expectations of diverse patient groups." Prayer rooms, halal food options, family accommodation arrangements, and gender-sensitive care practices significantly enhance patient comfort." (Participant 5, healthcare provider).

Integrated framework of findings

An integrated framework for health tourism development in Iran was developed through thematic analysis and is illustrated in Figure 4, produced by Atlas.ti software. This framework demonstrates the dynamic interrelationships among strategic positioning considerations, operational challenges and solutions, and the imperatives of innovation and sustainability for health tourism development in Iran.



Figure 4. Integrated framework for health tourism development in Iran

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings identified three primary themes: strategic positioning considerations, operational challenges and solutions, and the imperatives of innovation and sustainability in the development of health tourism in Iran. This study indicates that Iran has considerable potential for the development of health tourism, especially in specialized medical fields where advanced expertise is offered at competitive prices. Realizing this potential necessitates coordinated efforts to tackle regulatory complications, service consistency challenges, and issues related to international perception. Innovative approaches by proactive stakeholders illustrate methods for addressing these barriers via technology adoption, ecosystem development, and quality assurance frameworks.

This study expands our knowledge about health tourism in emerging markets through a detailed examination of Iran's current status, challenges, and potential future opportunities. The incorporation of thematic insights into an integrated framework provides a strategic guide for stakeholders seeking to leverage Iran's potential in this sector. To enhance Iran's status as a competitive health tourism destination, it is crucial to systematically address operational barriers, utilize technological advancements, and bolster international reputation. Ongoing research, especially incorporating a wider range of stakeholder and patient viewpoints, is essential for enhancing strategies and securing sustainable development in Iran's health tourism sector.

This study's findings are consistent with and extend the current literature on health tourism development in emerging markets. [Esenyel et al. \(2015\)](#) highlighted the significance of strategic management and stakeholder collaboration in enhancing competitive advantages in health tourism ecosystems. The findings support this, emphasizing Iran's strengths in medical expertise, cost advantages, and cultural appeal, while also highlighting the need for coordinated efforts among various stakeholders. [Hosseini et al. \(2015\)](#) identified regulatory barriers and infrastructural limitations as significant challenges. Our study corroborates these findings and further elaborates by offering detailed insights into operational gaps, including language barriers, inconsistencies in service quality, and issues related to international perception. The approaches examined, especially technological integration and ecosystem development, align with [Rostami and Babakhanian \(2024\)](#) investigation of digital marketing opportunities, particularly the potential of metaverse applications for virtual engagement. This study reveals contextual nuances specific to Iran's geopolitical and socio-economic environment. The influence of international sanctions and geopolitical perceptions on Iran's health tourism sector, as noted by participants, poses a unique challenge that has not been thoroughly examined in previous research centered on other emerging destinations such as Turkey or India. This highlights the necessity of customized strategies that take into account regional political dynamics, an area that prior research has only partially addressed.

This study presents several limitations, despite offering valuable insights. The qualitative design offers depth and diverse stakeholder perspectives; however, it restricts the generalizability of the findings. The sample size of 23 decision-makers, while intentionally chosen for their expertise, may not adequately represent the diversity of experiences within Iran's broader health tourism sector. The dependence on self-reported data may introduce biases

such as social desirability and recall bias, potentially affecting the accuracy of the findings. The study's emphasis on experts may neglect grassroots or patient perspectives, which are essential for comprehensively understanding the barriers and facilitators in health tourism development.

Future research must address these limitations by integrating quantitative methods, including surveys of international patients and healthcare providers, to validate and enhance the qualitative findings. Longitudinal studies may investigate the changing effects of technological innovations and policy reforms across time. Comparative analyses between Iran and regional competitors such as Turkey, India, and the United Arab Emirates may provide valuable insights into best practices and contextual adaptations. Investigating patient-centered outcomes, satisfaction levels, and cultural considerations from the viewpoint of international health tourists would enhance understanding and guide targeted interventions. This study enhances the understanding of health tourism in emerging markets through a detailed analysis of Iran's current status, challenges, and prospective opportunities. The incorporation of thematic insights into a cohesive framework provides a strategic guide for stakeholders seeking to leverage Iran's potential in this sector. To enhance Iran's status as a competitive health tourism destination, it is crucial to systematically address operational barriers, utilize technological advancements, and bolster international reputation. Ongoing research, especially incorporating a wider range of stakeholder and patient viewpoints, is essential for refining strategies and ensuring sustainable growth in Iran's health tourism sector.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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