

Thinking Like a Potential Health Tourist: Information Research to Break Prejudice

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Abstract

Introduction: When the health tourism literature was examined, it was seen that a potential health tourist's online information search dimensions were kept secret. This research aims to reveal how and with what keywords online information about health tourism destinations is searched by health tourists and to provide guidance on what health tourism destination management and marketers should do.

Methods: This descriptive cross-sectional study was based on the relational survey model, a causal comparison subtype of quantitative research methods. The researchers determined research keywords to examine the data in the years covered by the study. Filters related to the specified keywords were applied, and the results were sorted for each. Inferences based on these results were put forward. The study complies with the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) statement guidelines for reporting cross-sectional studies (Supplement 1).

Results: Global interest in medical tourism has risen between 2004 and 2023. Mauritius, Singapore, UAE, Philippines, and India are leading in health tourism due to unique advantages and international-standard services. Recent searches with filters like "Worldwide," "2008-2023," and "Health and YouTube" show notable interest in medical tourism in India, Mexico, Thailand, and Turkey.

Conclusion: Increasing search trends for health tourism also point to changes in the healthcare industry, and patients are increasingly looking for more options. The rising trend not only suggests a shift in patient preferences but also underscores the need for healthcare institutions to focus on international markets to meet the evolving demands of a globalized healthcare landscape.

Keywords: Health tourism, Medical tourism, Health tourist, Destination choice, Prejudice, Health Management

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Introduction

In recent years, it has been observed that health tourists are moving from developed countries to developing countries where quality health services are offered at relatively lower prices¹. Many factors affect this mobility. It is stated that these factors are two-way². Some health services are not offered in the countries where people live, the health services offered are expensive, and the waiting times required to receive the health services offered are very high. These factors push health tourists to engage in health tourism mobility³⁻⁵. In contrast to these push factors, the factors that attract health tourists and are put forward by destinations through marketing and advertising campaigns are promoted as

attractive factors². These attractive factors include quality healthcare services, safety and security, and hygiene level⁶⁻¹². To identify this push and pull factors, potential health tourists enter an information research process to receive health tourism services. Because the push and pull factors that include this information search constitute the motivation of potential health tourists. This motivation is the driving force of whether the health tourist will engage in health tourism activity¹³. The information research carried out by health tourists is the first stage of the health tourism destination selection process, and this first stage is the stage where the health tourist has not yet decided on any destination. This situation was discussed by¹⁴ as the

process of how motivation evolves towards the actual journey.

Despite the information obtained as a result of the information research conducted by potential health tourists, the push factors in the country of residence and the attractive factors of health tourism destinations, it is seen that some potential health tourists are prejudiced against some health tourism destinations. This prejudice is thought to arise from the potential health tourist's attitude towards the relevant country. Regardless of the source, it is a fact that this prejudice limits the list of destinations where potential health tourists will receive health tourism services. This prejudice causes the possible risk that is thought to exist in health tourism to become more extensive in the eyes of potential health tourists¹⁵. This is because the country's safety, security level, and political stability are among the crucial factors affecting the choice of health tourism destination^{6,7,9}. The level of safety and security¹⁶ and political stability⁹ lead health tourists to seek more information about health tourism destinations. This information research by potential health tourists is mainly done through online platforms. When the health tourism literature was examined, it was seen that the online information search dimensions of a potential health tourist were not revealed. Along with this deficiency in the literature, it has also been determined that potential health tourists may have prejudices about any destination, but this has yet to be revealed. These two literature gaps constitute the motivation for conducting this study. Considering this information, this study tries to find the answer to what kind of online information research a potential health tourist undertakes to break his/her prejudices. In this regard, this research aims to reveal how and with what keywords online information about health tourism destinations is searched by health tourists and to provide guidance on what health tourism destination management and marketers should do. This way, evidence will be provided regarding which keywords should be highlighted to break the possible prejudices of potential health tourists searching for information online by health tourism destination authorities.

Methods

Study Design

This descriptive cross-sectional study was based on the relational survey model, a causal comparison subtype of quantitative research methods. The researchers determined research keywords to examine the data in the years covered by the study. Filters related to the specified keywords were applied and the results were sorted for each keyword. Inferences based on these results were put forward. The study complies with the Strengthening the

Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) statement guidelines for reporting cross-sectional studies (Supplement 1).

Population and Sample of the Study

The current study's population consists of platforms where potential health tourists can search for information online. To ensure maximum diversity, Google Search, one of the online information platforms with the most extensive user base, was chosen to present the case study. Because health tourists can use both health tourism and medical tourism keywords, an attempt has been made to examine the situation in depth by searching various topics for these two keywords. The fact that two homogeneous groups of health tourists and medical tourists formed small and similar samples enabled the selection of keywords that both could use in information research. These keywords make the sample vital because they will reveal the similar characteristics of health tourists, who have homogeneous characteristics, and medical tourists, who are a subgroup.

Online Platforms and Filters for Information Research

The online platform where information research was conducted was the Google Search engine. The information research results between 2004 and 2023 were examined by making the following filters on Google Trends on the Google Search engine. Filters made in Google Trends:

1. Years searched: 2004-2023
2. Searched topics: Health
3. Search locations: Worldwide

Keywords for Information Research

The keywords in which the information search was conducted were chosen to be as specific as possible and, simultaneously, to cover the subject. Accordingly, the keywords that a health tourist can get information from while researching any destination or general health tourism are as follows: medical tourism, health tourism, health abroad, wellness tourism, and healthcare tourism.

The Role of the Researchers

The researchers scanned the keywords they had previously determined with the desired filters. The graphics and reports that emerged during these scans were taken as they were and created the relevant findings. While determining keywords and conducting research, the researchers tried to present the relevant situation by thinking like a potential health tourist. Throughout the study, the researchers did not take any action that would threaten the security of the results, and the results were provided as they were. Thus, even if other independent researchers carry out the study, it is inevitable that relevant findings will be obtained.

Model and Original Value of the Research

Information research by health tourists is a process that takes a certain period to obtain information about health tourism or the countries where health tourism is offered. Although this information search process satisfies health tourists, some health tourists are prejudiced against some countries or regions. To date, no study has revealed this prejudice held by health tourists and has not linked this prejudice with information research. This study, which was planned to fill this gap in the literature, revealed a structure that has yet to be obtained in other studies. The concept of prejudice in the destination selection stage in Figure 1, where this structure is divided into specific

stages, reveals the unique value of this study. Figure 1, which describes the process from the search behavior of potential health tourists regarding health tourism to the final decision-making stage with a diagram, brings a new perspective to the destination selection process previously developed by 14. According to the new perspective shown in Figure 1, which shows the model of this study, the previously missing bias reveals a new process in health tourism destination selection. This new process is modeled in three stages. This three-stage model examined the information search process of potential health tourists in three main stages: information search (I), pre-decision (II) and destination choice (III).

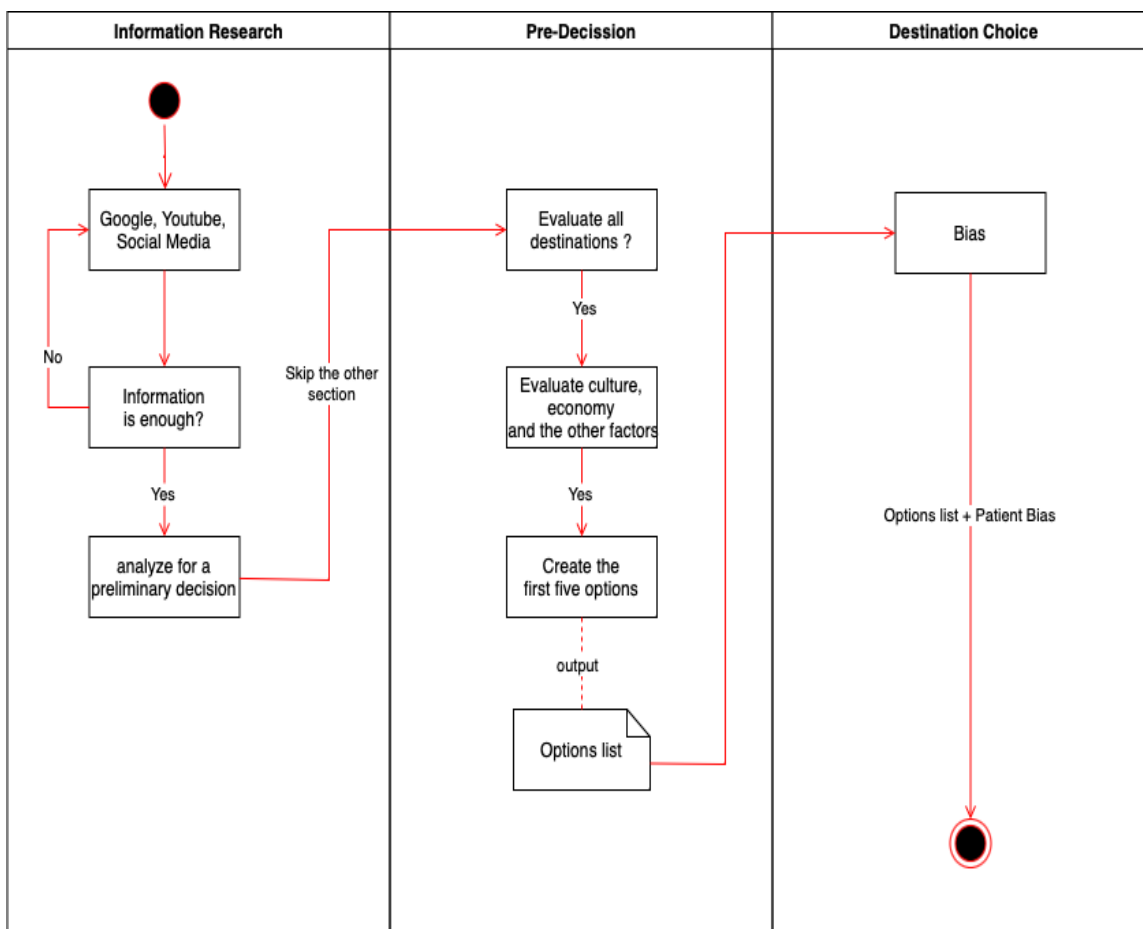


Figure 1: Three-Stage Information Search Model of Health Tourists (Source: Authors' Own Drawing)

Figure 1 shows the stages of the information search process that potential health tourists undertake to meet an emerging health service need in a destination outside their country, as well as the impact and possible consequences of prejudice, which is an essential issue at this stage. Accordingly, a potential health tourist first conducts information research on information health tourism and the places where health tourism services are offered on online platforms such as Google, YouTube, and social media (Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp etc.) 17. Suppose

it is satisfied that it has conducted sufficient information research. In that case, it moves on to the next stage, the pre-decision stage, and makes some evaluations and related eliminations. Some health tourists who create a list of possible destinations after making the relevant eliminations may be prejudiced against some destinations and regions, even if they cannot obtain objectively hostile information about them. For example, in the preliminary research of a potential health tourist, he/she saw that India was first among the most suitable places to receive the

health care he needed. However, since he/she had reservations about India (security concerns, hygiene problems, political problems, etc.), he/she preferred the second place on his list. Therefore, the bias parameter, which we think of as the bias of potential health tourists that is thought to exist in the health tourism information research process in Figure 1, may affect the choice of health tourism destination as a confusing factor. Knowing this prejudice is essential in revealing the need for

destination promotion units, promotion or advertising units or governments, which are essential stakeholders of health tourism, to make practices and promotions that will break this prejudice.

Results

The results of the searches made on Google Trends with the keyword "medical tourism" between 2004 and 2023 are given in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Searches made between 2004-2023 with the keyword "Medical Tourism"

The increase in searches for "Medical tourism" between 2004 and 2023 shows that interest in medical tourism is increasing globally. This situation is due to the relatively expensive healthcare services and increased waiting times for some healthcare services, especially in developed countries. For these reasons, it is seen that patients' cross borders and evaluate different countries to receive health services. This finding has enabled the keyword "medical

tourism" to be among the trends of recent years. Increasing search trends for health tourism also point to changes in the healthcare industry, and patients are increasingly looking for more options. This situation requires institutions and organizations that provide healthcare services to focus more on international markets (Figure 2).

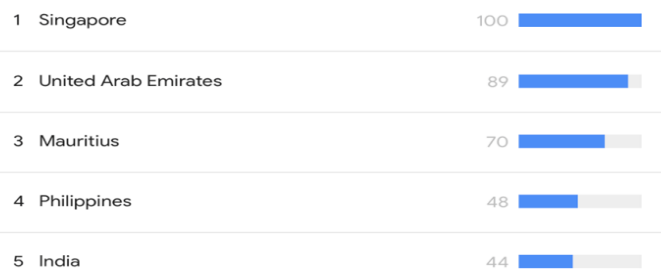


Figure 3: The Top Five Rising Countries in Health Tourism

The search results for the first five countries that stand out in Google trends regarding health tourism are given in Figure 3.

Singapore's first place in the search results can be explained by the country's advanced healthcare infrastructure, quality healthcare services and adoption of medical practices at international standards because Singapore became the sixth country with the best healthcare system in 2020, according to the World Health Organization. This has led international patients to choose Singapore as a reliable health tourism destination.

The United Arab Emirates' second place may reflect regional leadership and its capacity to provide luxury healthcare services. High standards of healthcare facilities and state-of-the-art medical facilities make this country attractive for international patients.

Mauritius's third-place position can be attributed to its natural beauty, tranquil environment, and health tourism potential. This situation also shows the need for patients, especially after COVID-19, for a tourism model that combines rest and treatment.

The fact that the Philippines ranks fourth may be due to its standout as a destination offering various health tourism options. High-quality medical services and affordable costs made the Philippines attractive to medical tourists.

India's fifth position can be attributed to its wide range of treatment options, low-cost healthcare, and advancements in specialist medicine. India attracts

attention with its economic advantages and diversified health tourism portfolio.

The rise of these countries in health tourism is associated with the unique advantages they offer, quality services and medical practices at international standards. This shows that these countries have a strong position in global competition in health tourism.



Figure 4: Medical Tourism Search Behavior on YouTube Between 2008-2023 (Worldwide)

Videos used to promote health tourism are generally uploaded to YouTube. The database we researched also allowed us to see YouTube keyword results. When searched with filters such as "Worldwide," "2008-2023", and "Health and YouTube," the results are as follows: India's medical tourism, Mexico's medical tourism, Thailand's medical tourism, and Turkey's medical tourism were reported (Figure 4).

The selection of YouTube as a primary medium for health tourism promotion suggests a recognition of the platform's global reach and its effectiveness in disseminating information. YouTube, being a widely accessible and popular video-sharing platform, serves as a means to reach a diverse and international audience interested in medical tourism.

Including the temporal filter "2008-2023" indicates a longitudinal analysis, capturing the evolution of health tourism promotion on YouTube over a considerable timeframe. This temporal scope allows for assessing how the approach to utilizing digital platforms for promotional purposes has evolved within the specified period.

The specific keyword results featuring India, Mexico, Thailand, and Turkey underscore the strategic emphasis placed on these countries in the context of medical tourism promotion. The selection of these keywords reflects a deliberate effort to showcase and highlight the medical tourism offerings of these nations on a global platform.

Including countries from various geographical regions (e.g., Asia, North America, Europe) in the YouTube keyword results suggest a broad and diverse landscape of medical tourism promotion. This diversity may cater to the varied preferences and needs of potential health tourists from different parts of the world.

The presence of India, Mexico, Thailand, and Turkey in the YouTube keyword results implies a strategic positioning of these nations in the global health tourism landscape. These countries have actively leveraged digital platforms to communicate their strengths and offerings in the medical tourism sector.

The alignment of health tourism promotional efforts with YouTube, as evidenced by the specific keyword results, highlights the dynamic interplay between digital media, global visibility, and the strategic promotion of medical tourism destinations over a significant period. This approach acknowledges the evolving preferences of the target audience and underscores the importance of online platforms in shaping the narrative of health tourism.

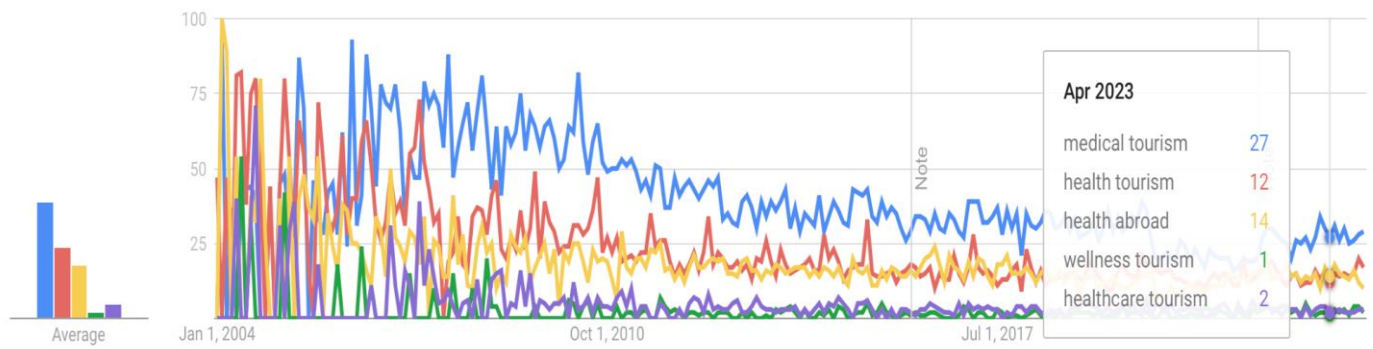


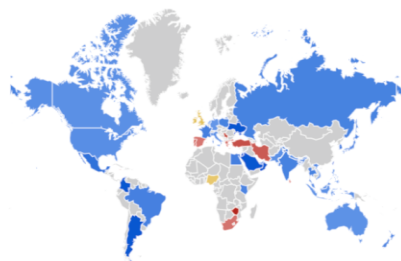
Figure 5: Results of Co-Scanning Keywords Concerning Health Tourism

Figure 5 shows the results when the keywords “Medical tourism,” “Health tourism,” “Health abroad,” “Wellness tourism,” and “Healthcare tourism” were scanned together.

Since potential health tourists searching for information about health tourism can search with different keywords related to health tourism, all possible keywords

were brought together and scanned. In this way, which keyword related to health tourism is searched the most can be seen comparatively. In addition, by revealing the keywords related to health tourism, it will be possible for institutions and organizations that advertise and market on this subject to learn the keywords that will be highlighted (Figure 5).

● medical tourism ● health tourism ● health abroad
● wellness tourism ● healthcare tourism



Sort: Interest for medical tourism ▼

1	Mauritius	████████████████████
2	Oman	████████████████████
3	Jordan	████████████████████
4	Saudi Arabia	████████████████████
5	Taiwan	████████████████████

Figure 6. Results Showing the Distribution of Keywords Related to Health Tourism by Regions

The results of the first five countries on the world map associated with the five keywords most searched by potential health tourists are given in Figure 6.

Figure 6 shows that the five most searched keywords in health tourism are most associated with Mauritius, Oman, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan. The most scanned keyword, “medical tourism,” is mainly associated with Mauritius, the “health tourism” keyword is associated chiefly with Oman, the “health abroad” keyword is mainly associated with Jordan, and the “wellness tourism” keyword is associated chiefly with It appears to be associated with Saudi Arabia. Finally, the keyword “healthcare tourism” seems more associated with Taiwan.

Discussion

This study was conducted to reveal the information research potential health tourists made before receiving health tourism services and the keywords they used in this information research.

Potential health tourists may have a prejudice about health tourism destinations. To break this prejudice, they first collect information about the destinations they can visit by conducting information research. They make their choices based on the information they collect. In this study, we, the researchers, wanted to fill the gap in the literature on the subject by conducting information research with the keywords we determined on Google, one of the online platforms, just like a potential health tourist. The findings we have revealed with the filters and keywords we have made on this subject will bring a new

perspective to health tourism destination selection. Findings from the research show an increasing interest in medical tourism between 2004 and 2023 ¹⁸. This is an expected situation. Because healthcare expenditures are increasing day by day ¹⁹. This increase in health expenditures causes a cadastral expenditure on individuals' income ²⁰. This situation especially forces people with lower socio-economic status in developed countries to show interest in health tourism ^{7,9}. In developed countries, those who cannot bear higher costs for health services or who do not consent to long waiting times have to move to more suitable places ^{1,5}.

It has been revealed that the top five countries in the field of health tourism are Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Mauritius, the Philippines, and India. This finding is similar to the results of the Medical Tourism Index report. This report shows that Singapore, India, the United Arab Emirates, and the Philippines have perfect scores. However, the situation in Mauritius is not included in this report. The reason for this situation is the difference between the study's time and this report's publication dates ²¹.

Recognizing the global reach of online platforms Google and YouTube and their effectiveness in disseminating information, the use of these digital platforms to promote health tourism between 2008 and 2023 was seen to be of strategic importance. This situation has also been reported in other studies ²².

The information research conducted by health tourists on online platforms with various keywords concerns all stakeholders of health tourism. Because the factors affecting the behavior and decisions of health tourists are also evidence for health tourism politicians and decision-makers, any policy that takes this evidence into account will be safe ²³. It is stated that the most crucial factor that increases the satisfaction of health tourists is to minimize possible risks ^{24,25}. It has been shown that minimizing these risks is possible by breaking the prejudices of health service providers in information searches by highlighting what health tourists desire.

Limitations of the Study

As with every study, this study also has some limitations. The most important of these limitations is that the study was conducted within a specific date range and included certain countries. However, to increase the likelihood of generalizability of the obtained results, the authors reviewed reliable literature and referenced previous quality studies and experience in their field of expertise. Since the models developed within the scope of the study are new and original, they are limited in terms of waiting for maturity.

Conclusion

This research shows that potential health tourists search for information about destinations on some platforms before engaging in health tourism. It has been shown that any information search by potential health tourists on online platforms should aim to reduce their preconceptions about destinations. Destination marketers, health tourism providers and policymakers should pay attention to this information. If health tourism service providers do not consider this information, there is a risk that the satisfaction of health tourists will be compromised. If this risk is addressed, even destinations offering high-quality health services at a lower price may be attractive to potential health tourists.

Highlights

What Is Already Known?

It is known that many factors influence the choice of destination for health tourism. The most important factors are quality, hygiene, proximity, affordability, culture, safety, etc.

What does this study add?

What Does This Study Add?

It has been shown that one of the factors influencing the choice of a health tourism destination can be the possible prejudices of potential health tourists towards destinations. This situation provided clues as to what health tourism policymakers and marketers should do.

Ethical consideration

This study was conducted with secondary data. For this reason, it is not a study that requires an ethics committee. Additionally, no ethical violations were made throughout the study.

Authors' Contributions

Concept, design, data gathering, and preparing the manuscript: H. Ç. and M. A. Ç.

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Conflicts of Interest Disclosures

We declare there is no conflict of interest.

Consent For Publication

We declare consent for publication.

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