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HOSPITAL BRAND IMAGE AND DETERMINANTS IN MEDICAL TOURISM: THE CASE OF SAMSUN

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to reveal the effects of word-of-mouth marketing, hospital social media accounts, user social media accounts, hospital advertisements and price policy on hospital brand image from the perspective of medical tourists visiting Türkiye. Data were gathered using English, Arabic, and Turkish questionnaires from 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023. There is a strong and positive relationship between hospital brand image, word-of-mouth communication (WOM), hospital social media use, social media accounts of followers, hospital advertisements ($r>0.500$, $p<0.01$). Hospital brand image is influenced by word-of-mouth communication (WOM), hospital social media use, social media accounts of followers, hospital advertisements and price perception ($p<0.05$). As a result of the study, it was determined that social media use and marketing activities were the most important predictors in the formation of hospital brand image.

Keywords: Medical Tourism, Hospital Brand Image, WOM, Social Media, Samsun, Türkiye

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INTRODUCTION

Medical tourism has emerged as an essential component of the health sector in many national economies. The medical tourism market size is projected to reach approximately 97.9 billion USD by 2030 (Market Analysis Report, 2023). In response to the economic potential of this market, countries are making strategic investments in medical services that aim to gain a share of this market by meeting the needs of potential customers. The range of services in medical tourism is broad, covering a variety of treatments ranging from aesthetic and bariatric surgeries to infertility treatments and dental health services (Taheri et al., 2021). Within this broad network of services, medical tourists seek not only superior quality but also cost-effective solutions. Therefore, it is crucial to become a preferred destination for medical tourists and to create a strong brand image in this field (Cham et al., 2022). Keller (1993) describes brand image as the perceptions consumers hold about a brand, which are reflected by the brand associations stored in their memory (Keller, 1993). Brand image represents the associations consumers form with a brand (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990).

The brand image significantly impacts consumer buying choices, particularly in choosing products and services from a wide range of competing brands (Górska-Warsewicz, 2022). According to image formation theory, consumers develop a particular perception of items or services when they encounter marketing communication and promotional strategies (Cham et al., 2016). Creating a brand image is influenced more by companies' marketing activities than by the functional aspects of the product or service (Parris and Guzmán, 2023).

There are many types of image concept in the literature. These are called corporate image, product image, foreign image, transfer image. In the last decade, especially in parallel with the development of medical tourism, the concept of hospital image has entered the literature (Koçyiğit et al., 2022). For this reason, it is necessary to mention the definition of hospital brand image in terms of medical tourism and why it is important for health enterprises (Yalman, 2023).

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Brand image is a critical factor for businesses as it has a great impact on strategic planning and organizational performance. The role of brand image becomes even more important, especially for businesses operating in the health sector where competition is intense and complex (Raka Sukawati, 2021). Hospital brand image is a whole consisting of healthcare users' thoughts, beliefs and perceptions about that hospital. In the studies conducted in the literature, it has been determined that hospital brand image increases medical tourist satisfaction (Salman and Esen, 2023), medical tourist loyalty (Aladwan et al., 2021), revisit and recommendation intention (Dikici and Akkılıç, 2023) and trust (Zengin et al., 2022). Realizing this situation, healthcare managers are trying to create a hospital brand image by using social media platforms, digital advertisements and digital marketing activities such as word-of-mouth communication in order to create a hospital brand image and get more share from medical tourism (Fahmi et al., 2022).

The development of the internet and related technologies has forced businesses to participate in digital markets and activities. Digital transformation is vital for collecting data to understand customers' preferences and expectations. Therefore, marketing efforts are now evolving more towards digital marketing (Kaya and Ündil, 2022). The intensive use of information technologies in the healthcare sector weakens the traditional boundaries of marketing in this field, which accelerates the digitalization process. Healthcare organizations use digital tools such as websites, mobile applications and social media to reach consumers (Armutcu et al., 2023; Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2023).

Social media encompasses tools that enable collaborative information generation and sharing online, fundamentally transforming how businesses engage with customers. Social media facilitates extensive communication through online discussions, reviews, chats, sharing of ideas, and video conferencing. This medium is portrayed as a new avenue for individuals to interact and exchange ideas freely. Furthermore, it acts as an influential platform for developing marketing strategies and influencing consumer perceptions and actions (Caber et al., 2021). Social media serves a crucial role in marketing, particularly within the tourism industry. It has emerged as the main information source for medical tourists looking for insights on medical destinations, healthcare experts, and treatment options in the medical tourism sector (Fletcher et al., 2017; John et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2019).

"Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing", a concept with deep historical roots in marketing literature, has experienced considerable theoretical evolution through the adoption of cognitive, emotional, and interactionist perspectives (Taheri et al., 2014) The literature predominantly defines WOM as "*informal communications among consumers regarding the ownership, usage, or characteristics of specific goods and services and/or their vendors*" (Westbrook, 1987). WOM has proven particularly effective in sectors like health services and tourism, where the products or services offered are intangible (Taheri et al., 2014). Numerous studies have demonstrated that WOM recommendations serve as a tool to mitigate the risks associated with these sectors (Cham et al., 2022; Han and Hyun, 2015; Taheri et al., 2021).

Al-Hasan (2024) found that social media marketing leads to an increase in hospital brand image and generates more revenue for the hospital (Al-Hasan, 2024). Mandagi et al. (2023) found that hospital brand image has a significant effect on patient satisfaction and revisit intention (Mandagi et al., 2023). Hoşgör and Sevim (2022) determined that hospital brand image affects patient satisfaction in their study (Hoşgör and Sevim, 2022).

Cham et al. (2020) determined that social media use, hospital advertisements and word-of-mouth marketing affect hospital brand image (Cham et al., 2020). In the study conducted by Yalman (2023), it was determined that price policy is effective in the formation of hospital brand image (Yalman, 2023). As seen in the studies, social media accounts, price policy, hospital advertisements and word-of-mouth communication are very important in the formation of hospital brand image. For this reason, this study aims to reveal the effects of social media usage and hospital advertisements, hospital price policy, and word-of-mouth marketing on hospital brand image from the perspective of medical tourists receiving health services from Türkiye. When the studies conducted in Turkey are examined, it is seen that there are more studies on the relationship between hospital brand image and satisfaction, hospital brand image and perceived service quality. Therefore, this study offers a different perspective on the impact of different marketing techniques on hospital brand image. The research design and hypotheses created to reveal this purpose are shown below (Figure 1).

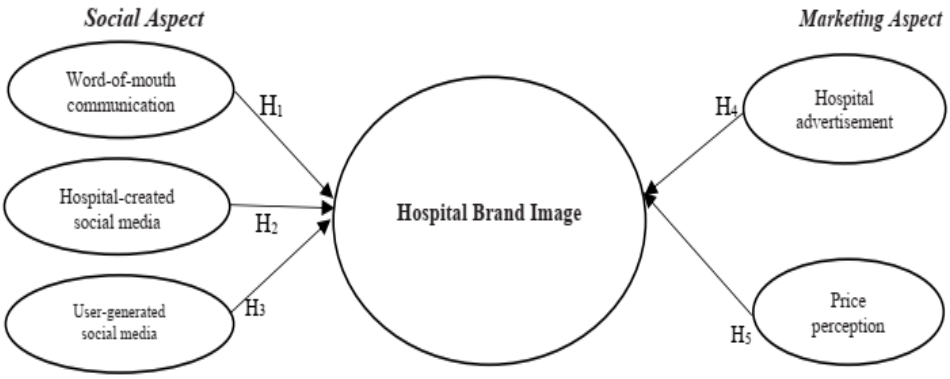

Figure 1. Research model

Hypotheses:

H_1: Hospital brand image is affected by WOM.

H_2: Hospital brand image is affected by hospital-created social media.

H_3: Hospital brand image is affected by User-generated social media.
H_4: Hospital brand image is affected by Hospital advertisement.
H_5: Hospital brand image is affected by price perception.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Population and Sample of the Study

The study is cross-sectional. The study was conducted in Samsun, located in the Black Sea region of Turkey. Samsun is the province with the largest population and the highest socio-economic level in the Black Sea region. There are many international hospitals and medical centers in Samsun there are direct flights from many countries to Samsun, which also has an international airport medical tourists from many countries come to Samsun, which has a highly developed health infrastructure. In 2022, 30.339 medical tourists came to Samsun according to the data of the Provincial Health Directorate the universe of the study consists of these medical tourists (SİNA, 2023). The minimum sample size of the study was determined as 384 with a prevalence of 50%, a margin of error of 5%, and an error level of 0.05, with 80% power. 21. (sina.saglik.gov.tr). The minimum sample size of the study was determined to be 384 at 80% power with 50% prevalence, a 5% margin of error, and a 0.05 error level (Gürbüz and Şahin, 2018).

2. Data Collection Tools

A questionnaire form was used as the data collection tool used in the study. In the first part of the questionnaire, a personal introduction form consisting of 8 statements was used to reveal the socio-demographic characteristics of medical tourists. The second part of the questionnaire includes the scale developed by Cham et al (2020). The scales and their explanations are given in Table 1 (Cham et al., 2020).

Tablo 1. Scales and descriptions

1	**Word of mouth communication Scale**	The scale developed by Cham et al. (2020) in English, Arabic and Indonesian consists of 5 statements. The scale utilizes a 5-point Likert scale, with scoring from '1-strongly disagree' to '5-strongly agree'. The scale does not contain any reverse items; scores range from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 25.
2	**Hospital-created social media scale**	The scale developed by Cham et al. (2020) in English, Arabic, and Indonesian consists of 3 statements. The scale utilizes a 5-point Likert scale, with scoring from '1-strongly disagree' to '5-strongly agree'. It contains no reverse-scored items; the lowest possible score is 3, and the highest is 15.
3	**User-generated social media scale**	The scale developed by Cham et al. (2020) in English, Arabic, and Indonesian consists of 3 statements. The scale utilizes a 5-point Likert scale, with scoring from '1-strongly disagree' to '5-strongly agree'. It contains no reverse-scored items; the lowest possible score is 3, and the highest is 15.
4	**Hospital advertisement scale**	The scale developed by Cham et al. (2020) in English, Arabic and Indonesian consists of 6 statements. The scale utilizes a 5-point Likert scale, with scoring from '1-strongly disagree' to '5-strongly agree'. It contains no reverse-scored items; the lowest possible score is 6, and the highest is 30.
5	**Price perception scale**	The scale developed by Cham et al. (2020) in English, Arabic, and Indonesian consists of 3 statements. The scale utilizes a 5-point Likert scale, with scoring from '1-strongly disagree' to '5-strongly agree'. It contains no reverse-scored items; the lowest possible score is 3, and the highest is 15.
6	**Hospital Brand Image**	The scale developed by Cham et al. (2020) in English, Arabic, and Indonesian consists of 3 statements. The scale utilizes a 5-point Likert scale, with scoring from '1-strongly disagree' to '5-strongly agree'. It contains no reverse-scored items; the lowest possible score is 3, and the highest is 15.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Variables	N	%
Age		
18-25	23	5.8
26-35	42	10.6
36-45	84	21.2
46-55	128	32.3
56 +	119	30.1
average age (20-71) 48.43±13.58		
Gender		
Female	204	51.5
Male	192	48.5
Education		
High School	311	78.5
University	85	21.5
Marital status		
Married	326	82.3
Single	70	17.7
How did you get here?		
Friend / Relative Advice	215	54.3
Internet / Social Media	143	36.1
Intermediary Institution/Agency	35	8.8
Physician Advice	3	0.8
Total	396	100

3. Data Collection

The survey forms were prepared in three languages: English, Arabic and Turkish. Since the original questionnaire forms were in English and Arabic, the questionnaire forms were translated into Turkish by language experts. Then, they were translated from Turkish to English again by different language experts and finalised. The research data were collected face-to-face between 1 July 2023 and 31 December 2023, with the support of the employees working in the health tourism unit and public relations unit of the health institutions. The study included medical tourists who had undergone all procedures and consented to participate in the research.

4. Data Analysis

As a result of the study, 396 fully completed questionnaires were imported into the SPSS 26.00 software for analysis. The data were subjected to percentage and frequency analyses, exploratory factor analyses, correlation, and multiple regression tests.

RESULTS

1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Of the participants, 32.3% were in the 46-55 age range, 51.5% were female, and 82.3% were married. It was determined that 54.3% of the participants preferred health institutions with the recommendation of friends and relatives (Table 2). Of the participants, 24.2% came from Germany, 10.9% from Georgia, 10.9% from Iraq, and 8.8% from Azerbaijan. 18.4% of the participants came from other countries (Austria, Norway, United Arab Emirates, North Macedonia, Denmark, Switzerland, United States of America, Bosnia Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Italy, Hungary, Syria, Bulgaria) (Figure 2). Of the participants, 47.2% received dental diseases and treatment, 36.7% received aesthetic, plastic, and reconstructive surgery, and 9.8% received ear, nose, and throat disease services (Figure 3).

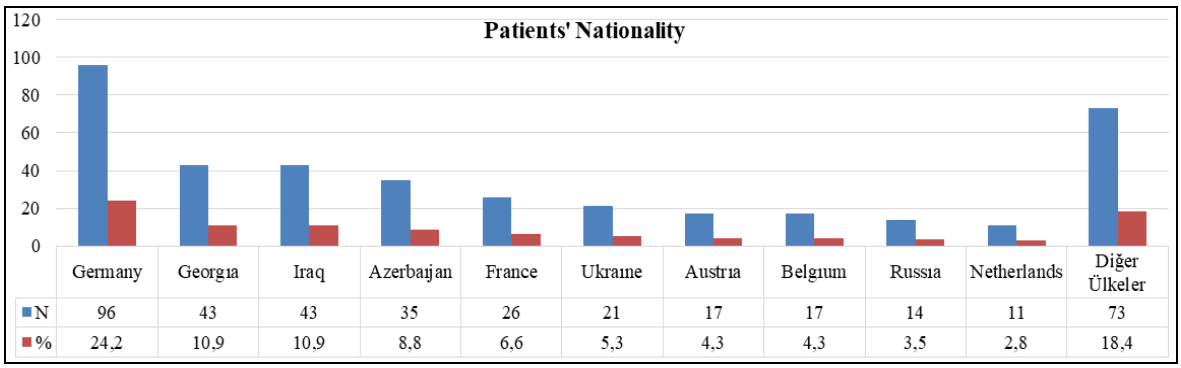

Figure 2. Countries of participants

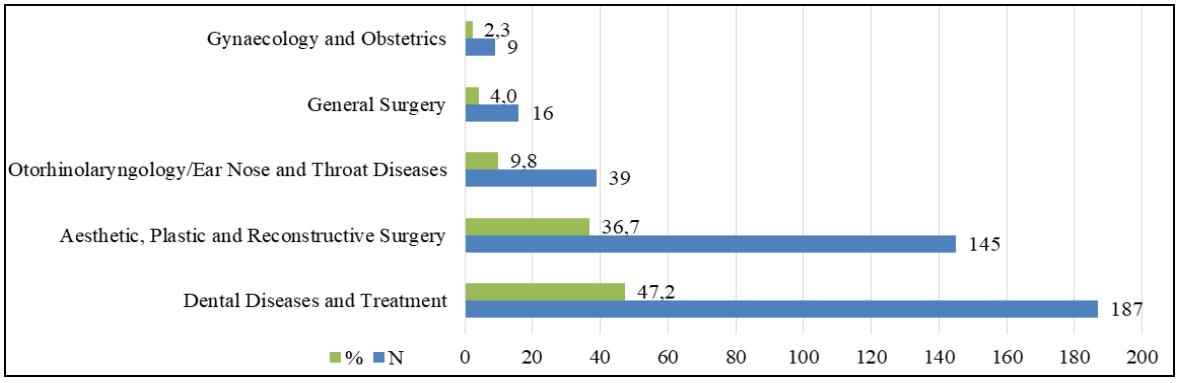

Figure 3. Specialities of treatment types

2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to ascertain the validity of the measurement scale. Initially, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed through Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy. The results indicated that the KMO value exceeded 0.60 (KMO>0.60), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance, affirming the data's appropriateness for factor analysis. Subsequent EFA results revealed that all items had factor loadings above the acceptable threshold of 0.5.

Furthermore, the composite reliabilities (CR) for each construct surpassed the 0.7 benchmark, and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was greater than 0.50, thereby confirming convergent validity (Gürbüz and Şahin, 2018; Hair et al., 2010). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha (CA) values for the scales indicated adequate internal consistency, with values of 0.801 for Word-of-Mouth Communication, 0.707 for Hospital-Created Social Media, 0.786 for User-Generated Social Media, 0.794 for Hospital Advertisement, 0.821 for Price Perception, and 0.839 for Hospital Brand Image (Table 3).

Table 3. Explanatory Factor Analysis

Scales/İtems	Factor Loading	CA (>0.70)	AVE (>0.50	KMO (>0.60)	CR (>0.70)
Word-of-mouth communication					
My family/friends had a positive impact on my perception of this hospital's brand.	0.773	0.801	0.703	0.778	0.822
My family/friends highlighted positive aspects of this hospital's brand that I hadn't thought of.	0.791				
My family/friends gave me positive impressions about this hospital's brand.	0.808				
My family/friends positively affected my judgment of this hospital's brand.	0.805				
My family/friends assisted me in deciding to choose this hospital's brand	0.790				
Hospital-created social media					
This hospital's social media communication about its brand meets my expectations.	0.798	0.707	0.648	0.694	0.708
When compared to the excellent social media communications of its competitors, this hospital's social media efforts for its brand hold up well.	0.758				
I am content with the social media communications of this hospital for its brand.	0.722				
User-generated social media					
The feedback from other users on social media regarding this hospital's brand aligns with my expectations.	0.785	0.786	0.723	0.719	0.887
In comparison to the high-quality feedback on social media from users about competing hospitals' brands, the feedback about this hospital's brand on social media stands out positively.	0.786				
I am pleased with the feedback from other users on social media about this hospital's brand	0.803				
Hospital advertisement					
I find the advertisement from this hospital appealing.	0.730	0.794	0.740	0.810	0.830
I focus on the advertisement's message from this hospital.	0.764				
As a medical tourist, the advertisement from the hospital is significant to me.	0.885				
The advertisement from this hospital offers me valuable information about its medical services.	0.701				
The repeated advertising of this hospital's brand affects my preference for it.	0.711				
The hospital's advertisement impacts me	0.724				
Price perception					
The cost of medical services at this hospital is reasonable.	0.783	0.821	0.698	0.714	0.761
The pricing for medical services at this hospital is fitting.	0.753				
On the whole, the pricing of medical services at this hospital is more affordable compared to its competitors	0.729				
Hospital Brand İmage					
This hospital's brand offers comprehensive practical functionalities, including medical services and sufficient medical facilities.	0.803	0.839	0.744	0.798	0.836
The brand of this hospital carries a positive symbolic value, characterized by a strong reputation, reliability, and a favorable image.	0,722				
I believe that the brand of this hospital is capable of delivering a satisfying service experience to me.	0.805				

Notes: AVE = Average variance extracted; KMO = Kaiser Mayer Olkin; CA=Cronbach's alpha; CR= Composite reliabilities

3. Scale Averages and Correlations

The mean scales were word-of-mouth communication ($\bar{X}$=18.73), hospital-generated social media ($\bar{X}$=11.45), user-generated social media ($\bar{X}$=11.23), hospital advertisement ($\bar{X}$=23.40), price perception ($\bar{X}$=10.30) and hospital brand image ($\bar{X}$=11.71) (Table 3). A correlation analysis was conducted to identify the relationships and directionalities among the scales. The results of the analysis indicated a positive and robust association among the variables: word-of-mouth communication, hospital-created social media, user-generated social media, hospital advertisement, price perception, and hospital brand image ($r>0.500$, $p<0.01$) (Table 4).

Table 4. Scale averages and correlations (*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level)

Scales	Items	Min-Max.	$\bar{X}$	*SS*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Word-of-mouth communication	5	5-25	18.73	4.11	1	0.642*	0.607*	0.597*	0.611*	0.696*
2. Hospital-created social media	3	3-15	11.45	2.27		1	0.578*	0.605*	0.613*	0.667*
3. User-generated social media	3	3-15	11.23	2.40			1	0.526*	0.599*	0.555*
4. Hospital advertisement	6	6-30	23.40	4.43				1	0.606*	0.614*
5. Price perception	3	3-15	10.30	2.46					1	0.613*
6. Hospital brand image	3	3-15	11.71	2.34						1

4. Multiple Regression Analysis

The multiple regression model to determine hospital brand image and its predictors was statistically significant ($F(5,390) = 39.893$, $p=0.000$). According to the analysis results, independent variables (word-of-mouth communication, hospital-created social media, user-generated social media, hospital advertisement, price perception) explain 58% of the change in the dependent variable (hospital brand image). According to the results of this analysis, hospital brand image is affected by word-of-mouth communication, hospital-created social media, user-generated social media, hospital advertisement, and price perception (Table 5).

Table 5. Hospital brand image and its determinants **(**Dependent variable: hospital brand image)

Variables	**B**	**SH**	**β**	**t**	**p**	**Tolerance**	**VIF**
Constant	3.367	0.726		4.638	0.000*		
Word-of-mouth communication	0.012	0.028	0.020	0.421	0.004*	0.72	1.39
Hospital-created social media	0.030	0.048	0.029	0.635	0.006*	0.80	1.26
User-generated social media	0.462	0.047	0.473	9.882	0.000*	0.74	1.35
Hospital advertisement	0.070	0.024	0.132	2.860	0.004*	0.79	1.26
Price perception	0.093	0.040	0.098	2.297	0.022*	0.94	1.06
Adjusted R^2=0.580	**F=39.893**			p<0.05			

DISCUSSION

The first finding of the study is that there is a strong positive relationship between word-of-mouth communication (WOM) and hospital brand image, and hospital brand image is affected by word-of-mouth communication. According to the research conducted by Stylidis et al. (2020), WOM is generally accepted as a reliable, comprehensive, unbiased and non-profit source of information. It has been determined that this method strongly and positively affectsustomers' perceptions, intentions and actual behaviour in purchasing new products or services (Stylidis et al., 2020). Cham et al. (2021) also found that word-of-mouth communication influences patient brand image (Cham et al., 2021). The study conducted with medical tourists by Abubakar and İlkan (2016) determined that WOM is influential in the choice of destination and health institution of medical tourists (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). The study by Zengin et al. (2022) determined that WOM affects patient branding image (Zengin et al., 2022). Based on these results, it can be said that positive word-of-mouth communication is a significant factor in creating the brand image of healthcare institutions.

Secondly, there is a strong positive relationship between patient brand image and communication between hospital social media account communication and user social media accounts, and hospital brand image is affected by these two variables. The study by Cham et al. (2016) showed that the social media content produced by the hospital significantly impacted the hospital's brand image. However, contrary to the results of Cham et al. (2016), this study shows that in addition to the content created by the hospital, social media content created by users also directly affects the branding process of the hospital. This finding reveals the comprehensive effects of social media, in line with the research of Cham et al. (2020), Aguerrebere et al. (2021), Aguerrebere et al. (2022), Saputra et al. (2022) and Zengin et al. (2022) (Cham et al., 2021; Aguerrebere et al., 2021; Aguerrebere et al., 2022; Saputra et al., 2022; Zengin et al., 2022).

These findings reveal that medical tourists frequently use social media to obtain reliable information about the hospital and prefer these platforms to reinforce their perceptions about the hospital's brand image. Considering this situation, it is clear that it is essential for hospitals to offer new and different content on social media platforms continuously. For example, hospitals can regularly update their social media accounts by using various types of content such as videos, stories and photos and sharing the most up-to-date information about their services. Additionally, including patient reviews, contact details, information about the hospital, medical treatment options, and real-time online posts can help hospitals develop their social media accounts more effectively.

Thirdly, a significant positive correlation exists between patient brand image and hospital ads, influencing the hospital brand image. Medical tourists may perceive hospitals differently based on hospital ads and social media before their service encounter. Hospitals with a strong brand image might influence patients' decision-making processes positively. This highlights the need for marketing communication before service is provided (Cham et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020).

Compelling and informative commercials can effectively influence potential buyers. Advertisements have a crucial role in generating customer awareness and establishing brand identity, particularly for newly introduced products and services (Kim and Lee, 2020). Hospitals can utilise their material to sell services, and medical tourists can share their experiences with others through user-generated content. Social media serves as a platform for creating and distributing information to effectively and affordably reach a broad audience of potential customers (Cham et al., 2022; John et al., 2018).

Fourthly, there is a strong positive relationship between patient brand image and price perception and hospital brand image is affected by this variable. Price is one of the most significant factors in the motivation of medical tourists in many studies in the literature (Çalhan and Arıcı, 2022; Polat and Omar, 2022; Üstün and Uslu, 2022).

Moreover, in different studies, it has been determined that price positively affects the satisfaction of medical tourists (Nikbin et al., 2019; Rahman, 2019; Rahman et al., 2022). In the study conducted by Cham et al. (2021), it was determined that price perception has an effect on hospital brand image, similar to the results of this study (Cham et al., 2021). Based on these results, it can be said that price perception is an important factor in hospital brand image.

CONCLUSION

Hospital brand image, which is a relatively more recent concept for the health sector, is a very important concept for health institutions to gain competitive advantage and ensure their sustainability. Due to the nature of healthcare services, quality cannot be clearly assessed even after the use of services, making brand image an even more valuable indicator for hospitals. This situation increases its importance day by day, especially for countries investing in medical tourism.

Hospital brand image is a marketing activity of strategic importance as it helps to improve the competitiveness of organizations. Therefore, a positive hospital brand image has the function of strengthening medical tourists' intention to choose that hospital. Therefore, it can be stated that this situation will reflect positively on the financial performance of

both health institutions and the country. In addition, it can be stated that medical tourists who perceive the brand image of a hospital as high quality and high prestige will have a positive perspective on the hospital and the services it offers.

As a result of the study, it was determined that hospital brand image is affected by word-of-mouth communication, hospital advertisement, hospital created social media, user-generated social media and price perception. Therefore, it can be said that health institutions that carry out marketing activities according to the innovations brought by the age will be more successful due to positive comments. Moreover, it can be said that health institutions with a high hospital brand image will earn more income than their competitors.

Therefore, brand image can be a unique and effective sales factor for hospitals operating in the field of medical tourism. This concept has the potential to significantly enhance the competitive advantage of healthcare facilities, making the nation a preferred destination for medical tourists and giving the country a competitive edge. Various stakeholders, such as government bodies, healthcare facilities, tourism service providers, and travel agents, have a crucial role in shaping the brand views of medical tourists. Positive relationships, good communication, and continuous collaboration among various parties are vital for enhancing the nation's reputation on the global stage.

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