






Designing an E-Learning Model for Health Tourism Marketing Case Study: Educational Healthcare Centers of Islamic Azad University, Tehran

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Heidari, H., Doshman Ziari, E., Barzegar, N., Faghiharam, B., & Mehdizadeh, A. H. (2024). Designing an E-Learning Model for Health Tourism Marketing Case Study: Educational Healthcare Centers of Islamic Azad University, Tehran. *International Journal of Innovation Management and Organizational Behavior*, 4(1), 20-27. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ijimob.4.1.3>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present research aims to design an e-learning model for health tourism marketing in the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran.

Methodology: The research method is applied in terms of its objective and qualitative regarding its data. The population included management experts with specialized doctoral degrees, heads of educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University, and their liaisons. The sampling was purposeful and snowball, selecting 14 experts until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Findings: The findings indicate eight dimensions along with 47 components for the proposed model. The identified dimensions (components) include: Strategies (national and macro, regional and international), Infrastructure (scientific interactions, cultural interactions, political interactions, economic interactions, legal and ethical, research and education, management, organization, technology, support, monitoring, and coordination), Contextual Factors (political ideology, cultural ideology, economic ideology, security, and welfare facilities), Resources (financial resources, human resources, content resources, and natural tourism resources of the country), Education (clinical training, continuous education, health education, organizational education), Processes (needs assessment, design, implementation, evaluation, feedback, and corrective program), Communication Literacy Level (communication technology, intercultural communication, advertising, organizational communication, public relations, international relations, and tourist rights), and Ideation (being a pioneer, opportunity seeking, risk-taking, leveraging resources, customer orientation, value creation, and innovation).

Conclusion: These results and the presented model can significantly assist in creating e-learning for health tourism marketing by the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran. Therefore, the use of these results is recommended to the stakeholders and beneficiaries in this field.

Keywords: E-Learning, Marketing, Health Tourism Attraction, Educational Healthcare Centers

1 Introduction

Education within organizations is not only important but also essential and vital. Although training in organizations for employees often exists in management and sales topics, employees with project management skills are considered an important asset for the organization. In today's changing world, training and development is a necessary function in the industry. Undoubtedly, education is of special importance in human life, as it involves construction, improvement, and excellence of humans. Education is one of the most complex tasks in managing any organization. Indeed, education has always been like a bountiful and illuminating source for polishing the human soul and acquiring skills along the way of humanity. Despite the abundant importance of training and universal agreement on its necessity, there is no uniform perception or framework about it (Bagheri et al., 2023; Rahimi et al., 2022). Educational models are communicative tools for summarizing or transferring knowledge, meaning, and concepts to make a process or concept easier to understand and comprehend. With the correct and precise application of educational models, the learning needs of a heterogeneous group can be met, opportunities and experiences can be provided that lead to successful outcomes, more attention can be paid to individual characteristics and talents, learning and retention capacity can be increased, individuals' self-esteem can be strengthened and improved, and overall, the quality level of the education and learning system can be elevated (Saber et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023).

As we move towards an information society in the new millennium, e-learning plays a very important role and will continue to demonstrate its flexibility and variety. E-learning is recognized as a factor that facilitates the learning process and leads to the development of learners' achievements using technology. Therefore, e-learning is considered important for these individuals. This technology can improve learners' progress and assist in achieving some of the standard educational goals without any access to an educational organization. Effective e-learning is achieved through the use of information and communication technologies. These technologies expand educational opportunities and help individuals expand their skills. Longitudinal studies show that e-learning can have a profound positive impact on engaging learners, positive attitudes of instructors, personalizing learning, and creativity (Bagheri et al., 2023; Wong, 2016). E-learning has been an important application of information and communication technology in the world

over the past decades. This type of education, also referred to as distance learning or virtual education, is a modern approach in the educational process with the help of new technologies and relying on information technology tools. In virtual education, face-to-face teachings are fully simulated and presented in a virtual and non-physical form. This educational method is possible in both synchronous (live) and asynchronous forms. In the synchronous virtual mode, information exchange between the teacher and the student happens live and in the moment. Synchronous virtual education enables interaction between students and teachers as well as discussion, question, and answer during teaching and learning. In asynchronous virtual education, educational materials are recorded in audio and video formats and made available to students or pupils at another time. This form of education also allows for academic assessment through exams and assignments (Montazer & Gashool Darehsibi, 2020).

On the other hand, tourism has become one of the most visible and dynamic jobs in humans to the extent that global problems and the threat of terrorism cannot defeat the eagerness to travel. Tourism is also one of the most important economic activities in today's world. In recent years, we have witnessed rapid growth in the international tourism market, so that in 2018, about 1.4 billion people traveled around the world, increasing the number of tourists has led to an economic growth of between 3 to 4 percent (Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Rahimi et al., 2022; Sharpley, 2020). Growth and development are the goals of any society, and different societies strive to identify their capabilities in various fields and make proper use of them to provide the ground for sustainable growth and development. In this regard, the tourism sector has been considered for investment towards growth and development in recent decades. Health tourism is one of the subsets of the tourism sector and is one of the fields that has the potential for investment and income generation towards growth and development (Bagheri et al., 2023; Saber et al., 2023). Citizens of many countries have long traveled to the United States and developed countries in Europe to seek advanced technology and expertise available in medical centers. Medical tourism presents significant concerns and challenges as well as potential opportunities. This trend will have an increasing impact on the healthcare landscape in industrialized and developing countries around the world. Medical tourism, a field of tourism that has attracted media attention in recent years, is fundamentally different from the traditional model of international medical travel; in the

traditional model, patients generally travel from less developed countries to major medical centers in highly developed countries for medical treatment that is not available in their own communities. The term medical tourism does not accurately reflect the reality of the patient situation or advanced medical care provided at these destinations. However, this term is generally used and provides a clear method to distinguish the recent phenomenon of medical tourism from the traditional model of international medical travel (Pakia et al., 2022). The most important factor in the growth of health tourism, which is part of medical tourism, is attracting international patients. Marketing is a success factor in attracting these patients and the growth of the health tourism industry. Leading hospitals and countries facing a massive volume of medical travelers have strong marketing strategies that meet the needs of these patients (Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Saberi et al., 2023; Sharpley, 2020). Tourism marketing is related to the eight Ps known as the marketing mix and includes Price, Product, Place, Promotion, People, Process, Physical evidence, and Physicians (Bagheri et al., 2023; Rahimi et al., 2022; Saberi et al., 2023).

Iran, considering its advantages and capabilities in health tourism, including low cost and unparalleled quality of health services, intends to use the available opportunities. One of the hubs for providing services to health tourists in the country is the Islamic Azad University of Medical Sciences, which offers medical and health services in its educational healthcare centers with high quality, but faces a fundamental challenge of lacking skills in the online space for utilizing capabilities and competencies in the field of health tourism marketing, which requires education to overcome this challenge (Bagheri et al., 2023). Health tourism is a type of tourism aimed at maintaining, improving, and regaining physical and mental health for a period of more than 24 hours and less than one year (Bagheri et al., 2023; Pakia et al., 2022; Saberi et al., 2023). Also, medical advances and the high level of healthcare equipment in Iran have created new opportunities for the tourism sector, especially in attracting health tourism. Due to its natural, cultural, scientific, and religious attractions, Iran has a high capacity to attract tourists. Furthermore, considering Iran's unique features, including high-quality medical services, low cost of drugs and treatment, access to advanced services and equipment, and the presence of skilled specialists, this country can meet the medical needs of tourists (Pakia et al., 2022; Rahimi et al., 2022). However, the country's problems in the health tourism industry include the weakness of the

health tourism information system, issues at the policy-making and management level, the presence of brokers as intermediaries between patients and medical centers, and patient dissatisfaction. The lack of insurance laws based on international standards and marketing programs, the constant change in global technologies, the weakness of laws in the field of medical crimes, and the appearance of treatment centers and hospitals are other issues in this area. Considering the medical capacities and strategic geographical location, the brilliant history of traditional Iranian medicine, skilled and reputable doctors in various fields, and the affordability of healthcare services can fully transform Tehran into the medical city of the country (Saberi et al., 2023).

In the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, although management and marketing planning and actions have been taken in recent years to attract foreign tourists, unfortunately, due to the lack of coherence and coordination between public and private sectors and especially the absence of codified regulations in the field of health tourism, this process is being implemented in an uncoordinated and traditional manner and has not had desirable economic results. In the value chain of health tourism in this city, the necessary connection and continuity are not established, which consequently, the marketing system of this industry also lacks the necessary order and regularity (Saberi et al., 2023).

It must be said that e-learning is not limited to specific job training. Nowadays, it has many applications in all areas, including marketing training. Marketing is a management process through which stakeholders meet their needs and desires through production and exchange with each other.

Therefore, based on the previous statements, the researcher seeks to answer the following questions:

What model can be designed for e-learning for marketing to attract health tourism in the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran?

2 Methods and Materials

The research method is applied in terms of its objective and qualitative in terms of its data. The population includes professors and management experts with specialized doctoral degrees, heads of educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University, and their liaisons. The sampling method was purposive and snowball, selecting 14 experts until theoretical saturation was achieved. In this study, to deeply examine and better understand the subject

in terms of the dimensions and components of e-learning, an initial literature review related to the topic was conducted, and the primary dimensions and components of e-learning were identified (literature and background analysis). Then, through semi-structured interviews, the dimensions and components were examined, and the Delphi technique was used to consider each of the opinions and integrate them to reach a group consensus for modifying, confirming, rejecting, or adding dimensions and components of e-learning for health tourism marketing at the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran.

Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, the recorded sessions were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data representation. The data analysis process was initiated with a meticulous reading of the transcripts to gain a deep familiarity with the data. This initial reading phase was crucial for identifying preliminary codes and themes that emerged naturally from the respondents' narratives.

Following this, we utilized NVivo (QSR International), a qualitative data analysis software, to facilitate the organization and coding of the data. This software supported the efficient categorization of data into codes, which were then meticulously reviewed to identify patterns and themes. The coding process was iterative, allowing for the refinement and merging of codes as deeper insights were gained through the analysis.

The thematic analysis was conducted in several stages:

Coding: Assigning relevant codes to data excerpts that capture the essence of the information related to the research questions.

Theme Identification: Grouping codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

Theme Review: Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, making adjustments as necessary.

Theme Definition and Naming: Developing a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying the essence of what each theme captures about the data, and determining the thematic map of the analysis.

Report Preparation: Weaving the thematic analysis into the narrative of the research findings, with vivid and compelling extract examples, to illustrate the themes' significance in relation to the research question.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, a reflexive approach was adopted throughout the research process. The researchers engaged in continuous reflection on

their biases and perspectives to minimize their impact on the data analysis. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were conducted at various stages of the analysis to challenge the emerging findings and ensure a rigorous and unbiased interpretation of the data.

3 Findings and Results

The categorization of themes to reach the final results in this study was a meticulous and iterative process, rooted in the thematic analysis framework. This process involved the transformation of raw, qualitative data into a structured set of themes and sub-themes that reflect the depth and breadth of the information gathered. Below, we outline the methodological steps undertaken to categorize the themes and articulate the study's findings.

After the coding phase, where significant pieces of data were highlighted and annotated with codes, we began the initial theme identification. This stage involved collating all codes and associated data extracts, facilitating the identification of patterns across the dataset. It was at this juncture that we started to see the emergence of broader themes that encapsulated the underlying meanings of the codes. This phase was iterative, requiring several rounds of data review and discussion among the research team to ensure that identified themes accurately represented the data.

With a preliminary set of themes identified, we embarked on a refinement process. This involved revisiting the coded data extracts for each theme to assess their coherence and to ensure that they formed a meaningful pattern. During this phase, some themes were merged, divided, or discarded based on their relevance to the research questions and objectives. This refinement process was critical to ensuring that the themes were distinct yet collectively comprehensive in addressing the study's aim.

To validate the identified themes, we employed a triangulation method, comparing our themes against existing literature and theoretical frameworks in the field of health tourism marketing and e-learning. This step was crucial for establishing the credibility and relevance of our themes. It involved an extensive review of current academic discourse to find corroborating evidence or contrasting viewpoints, which helped in further refining and substantiating our themes.

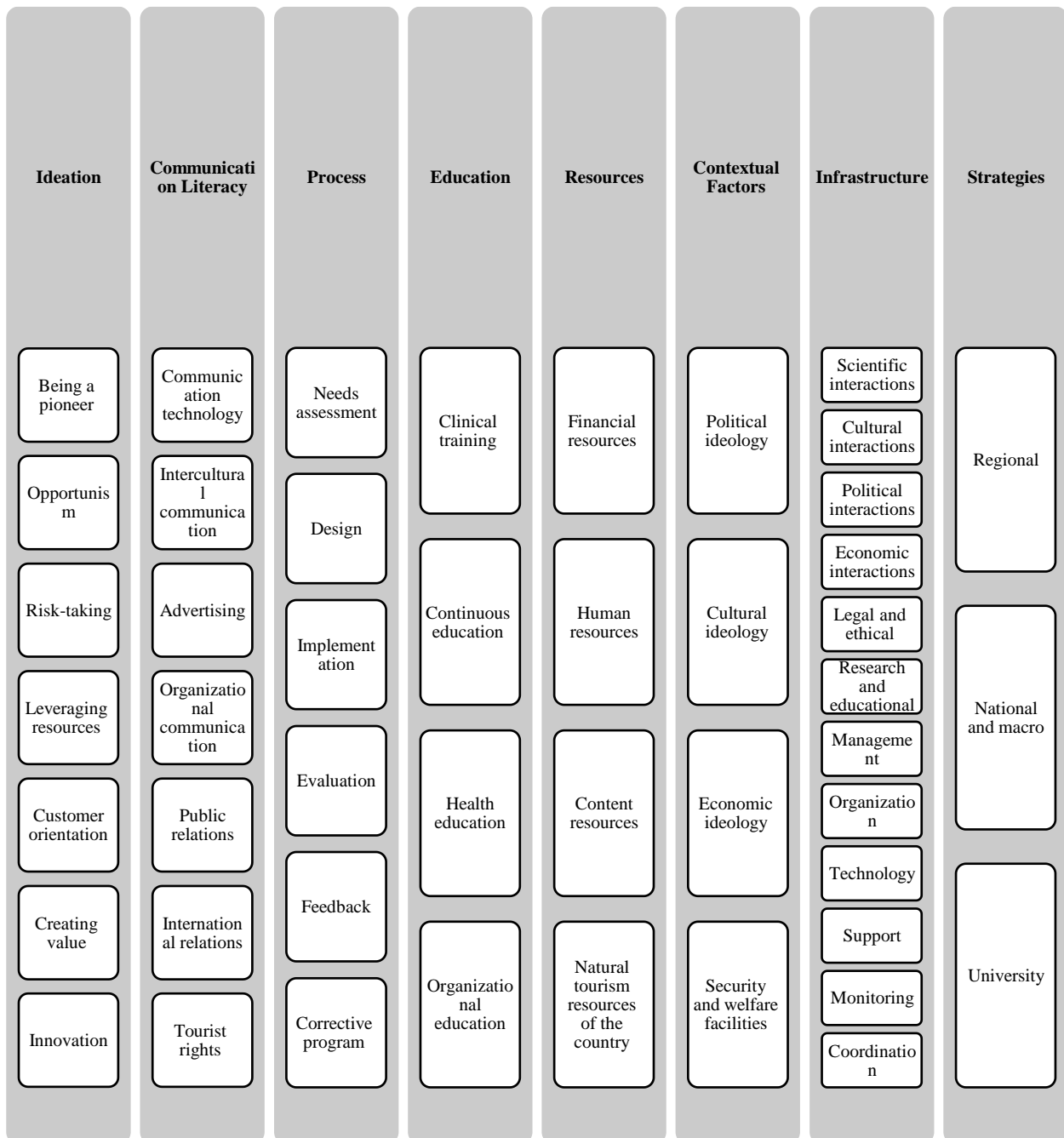
Once validated, the themes were organized into a hierarchical structure, with overarching themes encapsulated several sub-themes. This structuring was guided by the strength of the data and its alignment with the study's

objectives. The hierarchical arrangement allowed for a nuanced presentation of the findings, illustrating not only the primary outcomes but also the various dimensions and nuances captured within each main theme.

The culmination of the theme categorization process was the integration of these themes into the final results of the study. Each theme was thoroughly described and supported by direct quotes from the participants, providing a rich, evidence-based narrative of the findings.

Figure 1

Summary of Qualitative Analysis



Strategies: Strategies in the context of e-learning mean the same as strategy, setting goals, and devising a plan to achieve them. This study presents a long-term plan through

which health tourism can be attracted to the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University by designing objectives. Determining comprehensive strategies

at the national and macro, regional and international, and university levels significantly contributes to the establishment of the e-learning model and its expansion in marketing to attract health tourism at medical universities, including the Islamic Azad University.

Infrastructure: Infrastructures are the facilities that medical universities and the Islamic Azad University can provide to deliver quality education and improve in attracting health tourism through the use of these facilities. One of the necessities of providing e-learning is the presence of technology in terms of hardware and software that can offer and support suitable facilities for users in both areas. Components of e-learning in terms of infrastructures for facilitating the marketing of health tourism at the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran were identified, including scientific interactions, cultural interactions, political interactions, economic interactions, legal and ethical, research and educational management, organization, technology, support, monitoring, and coordination.

Contextual Factors: Contextual factors for education are those that develop and enhance e-learning in the environment provided for them, and these factors should be considered along with the provided education. The attitude towards the prevailing ideology, security, and facilities can be factors that play a role in the growth and progress of e-learning.

Resources: Resources are one of the important needs of an organization. Without financial resources, skilled and experienced human resources, the implementation of educational projects is not possible.

Education: E-learning is a type of education that uses modern and electronic tools to provide learning conditions for learners who, for various reasons, cannot be present at a specific place and time. In this study, e-learning will be provided to the target group of employees - medical staff - doctors at the educational healthcare centers for marketing to attract health tourism to the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, hence the provided education must also consider the target group.

Process: Process or procedure has different meanings in various sciences and in organizations refers to a set of structured and related actions creating a service or product. In education, it is a set of related activities that ultimately facilitate achieving the educational goal. In this research, a set of essential e-learning activities aims to realize attracting health tourism at the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran.

Communication Literacy: Communication literacy, as one of the essential literacies defined by UNESCO, is the ability to communicate appropriately with others and know social etiquette. In this study, communication literacy is the ability to effectively communicate internationally to enhance marketing and attract health tourism, thereby enhancing business and the connection between the university and the industry.

Ideation: Ideation is a process in which new and innovative ideas are created and detailed. Generating and nurturing new ideas is essential for continuous advancement. In this study, ideation leads to the creation and nurturing of ideas and innovation in e-learning to enhance marketing for health tourism at the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Medical universities are among the institutions that can contribute to the growth of health tourism in the country. Additionally, by attracting tourists, they can expand their research scope. In this context, the present study aimed to design an e-learning model for marketing to attract health tourism in the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran. To investigate and respond to the research issue, related documents were initially reviewed, and interviews were conducted with experts in this field.

The integration of the obtained results indicated eight dimensions along with 47 components. The identified dimensions (components) include: Strategies (national and macro, regional and international), Infrastructures (scientific interactions, cultural interactions, political interactions, economic interactions, legal and ethical, research and educational, management, organization, technology, support, monitoring, and coordination), Contextual Factors (political ideology, cultural ideology, economic ideology, security, and welfare facilities), Resources (financial resources, human resources, content resources, and natural tourism resources of the country), Education (clinical training, continuous education, health education, organizational education), Process (needs assessment, design, implementation, evaluation, feedback, and corrective program), Communication Literacy Level (communication technology, intercultural communication, advertising, organizational communication, public relations, international relations, and tourist rights), and Ideation (being a pioneer, opportunity seeking, risk-taking,

leveraging resources, customer orientation, value creation, and innovation).

The findings of this study are consistent with the results obtained from the previous research (Alberto Aning, 2020; Bagheri et al., 2023; Bari & Djouab, 2014; Collins et al., 2020; Costado Dios & Piñero Charlo, 2021; Graham, 2018; Mastan et al., 2022; Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Montazer & Gashool Darehsibi, 2020; Pakia et al., 2022; Rahimi et al., 2022; Regmi & Jones, 2020; Saberi et al., 2023; Sharpley, 2020; Wong, 2016; Xu et al., 2023; Zandi et al., 2023). Tourism marketing studies the marketing processes and strategies related to the activity and promotion of tourism. It also examines marketing concepts, market segmentation principles, target market principles, and marketing strategies. The marketing content in various tourism companies differs based on products and market segments. It is a method that promotes tourism products using marketing theories and methods. Similarly, the emphasis on contextual factors such as political, cultural, and economic ideologies aligns with the observations made by Zandi et al. (2023), underscoring the influence of external environmental factors on the success of e-learning initiatives (Zandi et al., 2023).

The thematic categorization revealed strategies, infrastructures, contextual factors, resources, education, processes, communication literacy, and ideation as pivotal elements, echoing the comprehensive approach suggested by previous studies (Costado Dios & Piñero Charlo, 2021; Graham, 2018; Montazer & Gashool Darehsibi, 2020; Regmi & Jones, 2020). This alignment reinforces the notion that a multi-dimensional approach is essential for the successful integration of e-learning in health tourism marketing, as it addresses both the internal and external factors influencing educational outcomes and marketing effectiveness.

Moreover, the identification of specific themes such as the need for continuous education, organizational training, and the development of communication literacy skills resonates with the previous researchers (Bagheri et al., 2023; Bari & Djouab, 2014; Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Zandi et al., 2023) who advocated for the integration of continuous learning and effective communication strategies in e-learning platforms. This study extends their findings by specifically contextualizing these needs within the realm of health tourism marketing, thereby highlighting the unique requirements of this sector.

The emphasis on ideation and innovation as critical components of the e-learning model for health tourism

marketing aligns with the perspectives previous researchers (Bagheri et al., 2023; Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Rahimi et al., 2022; Saberi et al., 2023; Wong, 2016) who posited that innovation and adaptability are key drivers of success in e-learning implementations. The current study builds upon this premise by illustrating how these components can be tailored to meet the specific needs of health tourism marketing, thus contributing to the discourse on innovation in educational models for specialized sectors.

Like other studies, this research faced limitations. For example, although software was used to analyze the conducted interviews, the analysis of the interviews was qualitative and mental, so it is possible that they were influenced by personal and mental perceptions. Also, it should be noted that the obtained results are based on data collected from the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, therefore there is a limitation in generalizing the obtained results to other centers and cities of the country. Additionally, it should be considered that the presented model is based on statistical validation and does not necessarily imply its feasibility and operability, and future research could complement this limitation.

In conclusion, it can be stated that these results and the presented model can significantly assist in creating e-learning for health tourism marketing by the educational healthcare centers of the Islamic Azad University in Tehran. Therefore, the use of these results is recommended to the stakeholders and beneficiaries in this field.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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