

Research on tourist guides' attitudes and competencies about health tourism in Türkiye

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the competencies of professional tourist guides in the context of health tourism. The research was conducted in the Turkish tourism sector. The study included 30 professional tourist guides affiliated with the Aydın Tourist Guides Association. A semi-structured interview form was used to collect data for the study. The data obtained from the participants were analyzed using descriptive content analysis and qualitative data analysis.

The responses given to the questions posed to the guides indicate some shortcomings in the field of health tourism. The most significant of these is that the guides either received no formal education or an insufficient training in health tourism and first aid during their education. Another significant deficiency is that the guides' knowledge of the health sector is based on superficial impressions. Their responses regarding health tourism, authorization, authorized agencies, and authorized health institutions reveal that they are unable to keep up with developments in the sector and lack sufficient information.

It is recommended that guides working in health tourism receive formal education related to health tourism, stay up-to-date with sector developments, and attend relevant meetings and seminars. Health tourism, such as thermal tourism, spa tourism, elderly and accessible tourism, medical and wellness tourism, has to be defined as a different field from classic tourist guiding.

The rapid growth of the sector also cause some regulatory problems. To protect the advantages in the long term, the issue of regulation should be considered an important matter that needs to be addressed.

Keywords: Tourist guiding, health tourism, health tourism in Türkiye



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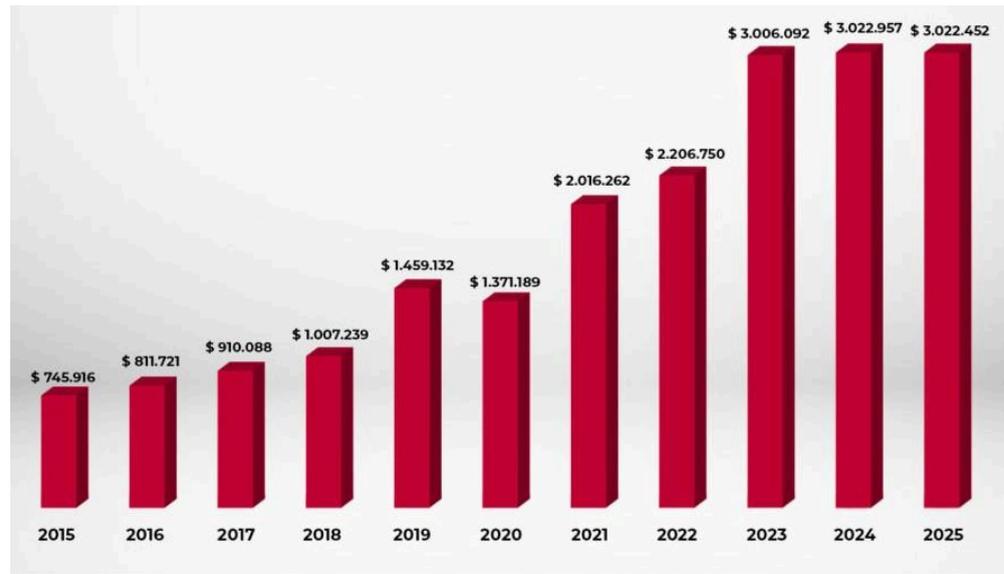
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Introduction

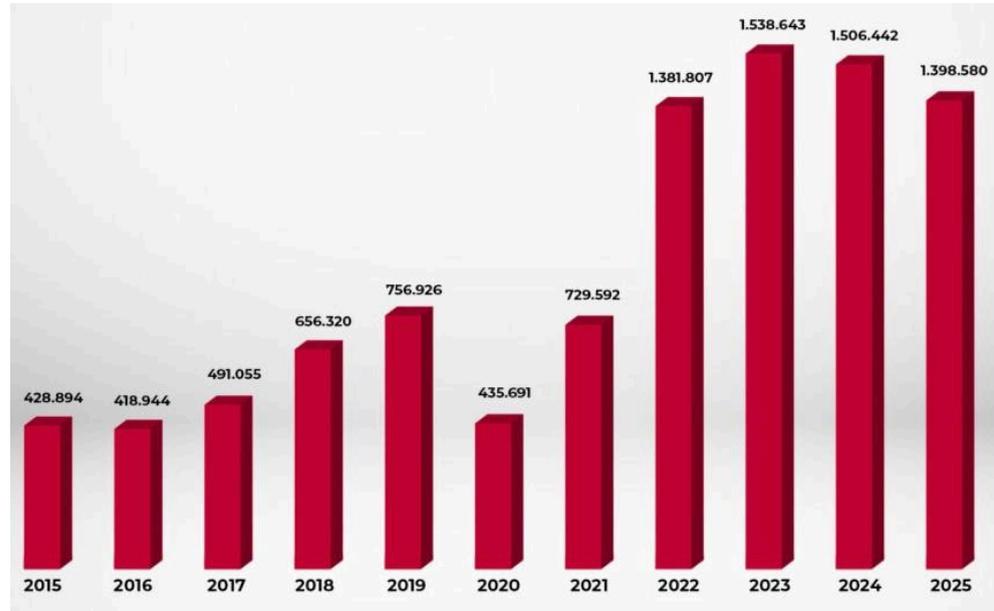
Tourism is one of the largest service sectors in the world. With the growth in aviation, technology, and e-business, along with demographic changes, tourism has a significant impact on the GNP and employment of countries (Deęirmencioęlu ve Kurnaz, 2021). Health tourism, an important sector in the general tourism industry, covers some sub-areas such as medical tourism/ spa/ wellness tourism, accessible tourism, and elderly tourism.

Expenditures in health tourism have increased in recent years in Türkiye. In 2002, expenditures in health tourism was 1% of tourism expenditures. In 2020, this ratio increased to 4.5 %. Accordingly, income from health tourism has increased. In 2024, income from health tourism was 5% of tourism; it increased to 6.9 % in the first quarter of 2024 (Anadolu Ajansı). In 2019, while approximately 750 thousand people preferred Trkiye for health tourism, in 2025, approximately 1.4 million tourists preferred it for this purpose. Accordingly, for the same period, income from health tourism increased from 1.5 million USD to 3 million USD (Graph 1, 2). In these records, both income and the number of tourists increase twice. In the last decade, profit has increased four times, and the number of tourists has increased 3.3 times (UHSAŞ). Therefore, health tourism is accepted as a value-added sector in Trkiye (am ve ılgınoęlu, 2021).



Şekil 1. Income in health tourism in Trkiye

Kaynak: <https://www.ushas.gov.tr/saglik-turizmi-verileri/>



Şekil 2. Number of tourists in health tourism in Türkiye

Kaynak: <https://www.ushas.gov.tr/saglik-turizmi-verileri/>

Heavy competition in health tourism, increases and changes in demand and expectation of tourists, require destinations to produce qualified services and update their infrastructures, equipment, and service approaches. Quality, service approach, and understanding of hospitals, clinics, personnel in health tourism, and third parties related to health tourism affect health tourism directly.

Tourist guides are the people who guide domestic and foreign tourists according to predefined directions and destinations, inform them about these directions and destinations, and help them gather suitable and correct sociocultural engagement (Akdu et al, 2018). Professional tourist guides, as indirect representatives of health tourism, are engaged in health tourism directly or as third parties. In this respect, tourist guides have important roles in customer satisfaction and the decision of revisiting of tourists in health tourism (Çetinkaya ve Öter, 2016). Correspondingly, as the first representatives of the country's image in the national tourism program, these guides have exceptional roles to contribute positively to the country's image. In this respect, professional tourist guides play an effective bridge between the cultures of domestic countries and tourists' countries (Kılıçlar ve Çevrimkaya, 2019).

Countries such as Panama, Brazil, Malaysia, Costa Rica, Thailand, India, Türkiye, Hungary, Dubai, the US, Mexico, and Singapore are the top-of-mind countries in health tourism (Akdu et al., 2018). High costs in health services, increases in health demand in the population, and an increased portion of health expenditures among other expenditures in the developed countries prompt social security institutions and insurance agencies to make health agreements with neighbouring countries and decrease costs by outsourcing services.

Türkiye, with its exceptional natural and historical beauties, suitable climate, and cultural similarity, is an attractive destination for especially Middle Eastern countries (Yardan et al.,

2014). At the same time, cost advantages compared with other developed countries, qualified health personnel, and an adequate number of hospitals and medical centers are the other factors that make T rkiye one of the perfect alternatives for health tourists (Barca et al., 2013).

The main purpose of this study is to research the proficiencies of professional tourist guides in health tourism. Toward this aim, face-to-face interviews were carried out with 30 tourist guides in the Aydın Tourist Guide Chamber (ATRO). The gathered data are analysed with content analysis.

It is expected that this study will contribute to other studies in health tourism and to the development of the sector.

Methodology

Importance and objective

The most important function of tourist guides is their communication with tourists. They act as a bridge among cultures. The quality and way of services they provide, the way they introduce services and products, their communication, and their sufficient knowledge of the sector are all crucial for tourist satisfaction (Kılı lar ve  evrimkaya, 2019).

Travel trends are becoming increasingly diverse worldwide. Various types of tours are now being designed to meet the specific expectations, wishes, and needs of individuals. Health tourism is one such type of tourism. In this context, it is crucial for sector representatives or sector employees working in various tourism fields to gain expertise in their respective sectors and possess the necessary competencies (Akdu et al., 2018).

In this context, the objective of this study is to examine the competencies of professional tourist guides regarding health tourism.

Field and content

The research was conducted in the Turkish tourism sector. The study included 30 professional tourist guides affiliated with the Aydın Tourist Guides Association (ATRO), one of the stakeholders in T rkiye's health tourism.

Data gathering and analysis

A semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher was used to collect data for the study. Personal data of the participating tourist guides, such as name, email, and phone number were not collected. The data obtained from the participants were analyzed using descriptive content analysis and qualitative data analysis.

Research questions

The following questions were directed to the participants:

1. Do you have any knowledge about health tourism in T rkiye, and what does the concept of health tourism mean to you?
2. Did you take any health tourism or first aid courses during your formal education?



3. Do you think the level of your foreign language is adequate to work in health tourism?
4. Do Tourists visiting Turkey inquire about health tourism or healthcare services in T rkiye?
5. Are you aware of any agencies operating in the field of health tourism in your region?
6. Are you aware of licensed medical institutions operating in the field of health tourism?

Findings

The demographic characteristics

Most of the participants are males; only 13% of them are females. This ratio is too low compared with other sectors such as medical services, education, and marketing. This may be a result of the special working environment of the profession. Participants are in a relatively young age group (25-44), and the level of education is high (76% university degrees). All participants use English in the guiding activities. Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Indonesian are rarely used. The tenure of participants in this sector is high. 87 % of participants have more than 4 years tenure, and 1/3 of them have more than 15 years tenure. This shows that they have enough experience and can build a long-term career in the profession. 70 % of them serve in the local field. These data show that their professional qualifications are adequate.

Familiarity with health tourism

The first question directed to participants is “Do you have any knowledge about health tourism in T rkiye, and what does the concept of health tourism mean to you?”

Participants responded these questions by generally defining the concept of health tourism. Based on their responses, participants indicate that they have an understanding of the concept. The participants' responses reveal that health tourism is defined primarily as travel for health preservation, including all types of treatment such as aesthetic, cosmetic, and dental care. However, participants also highlight the possibility of combining treatment with tourism and cultural excursions, as well as benefiting from technological advancements and qualified healthcare personnel. Participants consider health tourism as a developing sector with significant potential opportunities. One participant draws attention to the fact that inadequately qualified individuals aiming to earn easy money are entering the sector. Based on the answers, it appears that participants possess some knowledge about health tourism and have observed the opportunities closely.

Health tourism or first aid courses during formal education

Participants were asked whether they received any education in health tourism or first aid during their education, and their responses were as follows:

The vast majority of participants stated that they did not take any courses related to health tourism or healthcare during their training. Some participants stated that they only took mandatory first aid courses, while a smaller number took elective courses on travel-related illnesses. It appears that the participating guides did not receive sufficient training in health tourism during their formal education, and only a small percentage received first aid courses.



Adequacy of foreign language in health tourism

Participants were asked, "Do you think the level of your foreign language is adequate to work in health tourism?" The participants' answers varied. Some participants stated that their foreign language level was insufficient for understanding health-related terminology, while others believed that mastering health-related terminology was not necessary. However, based on the responses, it appears that this did not pose a serious problem for either service. This can be attributed to the fact that in emergencies, the focus is on explaining the patient's problem, not their illness, and ensuring access to healthcare facilities.

Tourists' inquiries about health tourism or healthcare services in Türkiye

Participants were asked whether visiting Turkey for cultural tourism inquired about health tourism or healthcare services in Türkiye?

To the participants' responses, it was understood that some tourists coming to our country for cultural tourism requested recommendations for doctors and healthcare facilities for hair transplantation, cosmetic procedures, stomach surgeries, and dental treatments. One participant stated that tourists coming to our country now do their research, make appointments, and arrange everything beforehand, and therefore no longer make such requests.

Awareness of any agencies operating in the field of health tourism

Participants were asked about information regarding health tourism agencies in their region. Participants' responses are too diverse to this question. However, the guides do not have definitive information about the authorized institutions in their area; in other words, they have secondhand information. Some participants consider this sector too risky due to the long service periods, but they also point out that the sector is attractive, especially due to government incentives and profitability, and that the number of firms has increased rapidly, particularly after the pandemic. Some tour guides want to obtain licences for their own companies.

Awareness of licensed medical institutions operating in the field of health tourism

The participants were asked about information regarding healthcare facilities in their area that engage in health tourism and possess health licenses.

According to the participants' responses, almost all participants were aware of the existence of healthcare facilities in their regions, but they had little information about whether these facilities had the necessary licenses. Participants stated that dental clinics serving tourists were quite common in their regions. They also mentioned that a hospital in the area accepts a large number of health tourists, particularly for stomach surgeries, and that tourists come to a thermal spa for treatment. Some participants noted that Istanbul and Antalya were very advanced in aesthetic procedures and hair transplantation, and that their region was not yet at that level. One participant pointed out that many healthcare facilities treated tourist patients, but these facilities were not adequately supervised. As can be understood from the responses, guides are aware of the health tourism activities of healthcare facilities in their area. However, regarding whether these facilities have the necessary licenses, their response was at the level of "if they are operating, they must have the licenses."



Conclusion

Evaluating the findings of the research, the following conclusions were reached:

A significant majority of those working as tourist guides are male. This situation has been interpreted as stemming from the challenging working conditions of the guiding profession. The participating guides are relatively young, and these years can be considered the most productive years of the profession. The fact that most of the guides have more than 4 years of experience and are university graduates indicates that the tourist guide profiles are at a sufficient level.

The responses to the questions posed to the guides indicate some shortcomings in the field of health tourism. The most important of these is that the guides either received no education or insufficient education in health tourism and first aid during their formal education. Another significant deficiency is that the guides' knowledge of the health sector is based on superficial impressions. Their responses regarding health tourism, authorization, authorized agencies, and authorized health institutions reveal that they are unable to keep up with developments in the sector and lack sufficient information.

Therefore, it is recommended that guides working in the field of health tourism receive formal education related to health tourism, follow developments in the sector, and attend sector-related meetings and seminars.

The rapid growth of the sector also brings with it some regulatory problems. In order to protect the advantages in the long term, the issue of regulation should be considered an important matter that needs to be addressed.

It is recommended that health tourism and first aid courses be made compulsory for students studying in the tourist guide program.

The tourism sector comprises so many different areas. Health tourism is gaining increasing importance within the tourism sector. Due to the professional characteristics of guides working in this sector, there is a continuous need for change and renewal. The most important reason for this is the ever-changing expectations of tourists. In this respect, health tourism guiding must be seen as a different field from classic tourist guiding. In areas such as thermal tourism, spa tourism, elderly and accessible tourism, and medical and wellness tourism, tourist guides are needed to direct tourists with their knowledge and experience.

This research is expected to shed light on future research. Larger-scale studies are needed in this area.

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