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DETERMINING THE NATIONAL SCALA HOMOGENEITY OF HEALTH TOURISM ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED IN TURKIYE

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to determine whether the health tourism activities carried out in Türkiye are distributed homogeneously or not, and in case of heterogeneous distribution, to determine the most common types of health tourism. Document analysis, one of the qualitative research methods within the scope of the research, was chosen and this study was conducted by compiling the data obtained from the literature. In the research, even if medical tourism is carried out in every region of the country, it is predominantly common in the Marmara, Aegean, Central Anatolia and Mediterranean Regions; Thermal tourism is more common in the Aegean, Central Anatolia, Eastern Anatolia, Southern Marmara and Black Sea Region; It has been concluded that elderly and disabled tourism is more common in the Mediterranean and Central Anatolia Region, and spa-wellness tourism is more common in the Aegean Region and Mediterranean Region. As a result, the health tourism system provided in Türkiye is generally heterogeneously distributed. Since thermal tourism activities are shaped according to the country's resources, it is not possible to ensure a homogeneous distribution in general, but various solution suggestions are being developed to encourage medical, spa-wellness, elderly, and disabled tourism in different parts of the country.

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INTRODUCTION

Various definitions have been put forward regarding the concept of "health tourism", which is quite new in the literature. According to the most generally accepted definition, health tourism, which is the whole of the individual's travel from one place to another to gain or maintain his health and the accommodation activities he carries out during this time, appears as a type of tourism with different dimensions in this respect (Göktaş, 2018). Health tourism is divided into various groups. This classification is examined in four categories. These (Çabuk, 2023);

a) Medical Tourism: It is a type of tourism carried out from one place to another for medical treatment purposes.

b) Thermal Tourism: It is a type of health tourism that is treated by using thermal waters.

c) Disabled and Elderly Tourism: It is a type of health tourism that includes travels of individuals in the third age group or with disabilities to a place other than where they live.

d) Spa-Wellness Tourism: It is a type of health tourism in which various waters and mixtures are applied to the individual's body (Çabuk, 2023).

Tourists who will benefit from health tourism compare the treatment opportunities in their country and the destination. The determining parameters here are expert staff, cost, and service quality. In this respect, while various training activities are carried out to increase specialization in the sector, on the other hand, an economic policy is followed in terms of examining individual purchasing behavior and it is aimed to increase the existing quality in this way (Yılmaz & Yılmaz, 2022).

Nowadays, the increasing desire to take a holiday for health purposes, the high number of the elderly population, and the long periods of waiting time to receive health services have made the health tourism sector an important source of income for the countries of the world. This situation has created the need for a strong management policy to eliminate the deficiencies identified regarding health tourism, determine target strategies, reveal the existing potential, and effectively announce them to the public. Some countries have even made this issue a state policy, and many companies in the state and private sector have aimed to promote the sector to the world in the most effective way through mass media (Yılmaz & Yılmaz, 2022). Türkiye, which is also one of these countries, has carried out various studies in this regard and as a result, it has become a country that has hosted quite a lot of tourists in recent years. In 2019, while 701,046 people received services from Türkiye within the scope of health tourism, an income of 1,492,438 thousand US dollars has obtained. In the Covid-19 pandemic that emerged in 2020, there was a decline in these data, and as a result, the number of health tourists decreased to 407,423 people, while the revenue generated decreased to USD 1,164,779 thousand. By 2021, 670,730 people received health services and the revenue generated from this was USD 1,726,973 thousand. In 2022, the number of health tourists reached 1,258,382 revenues rose to USD 2,119,059 thousand. As by 2023, while 746,290 people travelled to Türkiye for health purposes in the first half of the year USD 1,033,942 thousand in revenues were generated (Uluslararası Sağlık Hizmetleri Anonim Şirketi, 2023).

This research was carried out to determine whether the distribution of health tourism activities, which are carried out in many parts of Türkiye, is homogeneous or not, and in case of heterogeneous distribution, to determine which type of health tourism is carried out predominantly in which regions.

The data obtained will suggest an idea in terms of eliminating regional differences.

Health Tourism In Türkiye

When health tourism activities in the world are investigated, it is evident that the cost factor is at the forefront. The cost of healthcare services provided worldwide is higher in developed countries, and many treatments are not covered by insurance. Therefore, health tourism activities are more common in developing countries with strong health infrastructure rather than in developed countries. Türkiye, one of the developing countries, is also very popular with health tourists due to its affordable pricing. In addition to the cost factor, the presence of advantageous climate and transportation conditions and the presence of other related alternative tourism activities in our country make Türkiye stand out as a brand in health tourism (Dikmetaş Yardan et al., 2014).

The number of health tourists in our country, which is one of the world's important markets in health tourism, is increasing day by day (Sulku, 2017). According to 2018 data, citizens from Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Germany mostly visited Türkiye for health tourism, while Istanbul, Antalya, and Ankara were among the most preferred cities (Uysal Şahin & Şahin, 2018). Heart, aesthetic, and dental operations are among the branches most preferred by tourists. Türkiye has many strengths in providing healthcare services. That power; While this is due to having elements such as expert staff, health infrastructure, appropriate geographical and human resources, auxiliary factors such as beliefs, cultural similarities, and dynamic population have also contributed greatly to the development of health tourism in Türkiye. On the other hand, factors such as individuals' low health tourism awareness (literacy), the low number of personnel who speak foreign languages, and the insufficient share of health tourism in general tourism revenues appear as Türkiye's weak aspects (Sulku, 2017).

While Türkiye is assertive in terms of medical tourism, it also has significant potential in terms of other types of health tourism. When evaluated in terms of spa tourism, it reveals that Türkiye is one of the leading countries in the world in terms of the number and quality of resources and facilities. There has been a visible increase in the number of spa-wellness applications, one of the other types of health tourism, and the number of applications and facilities for elderly and disabled tourists. The 62% increase in the number of health tourists in our country between 2013 and 2017 supports the conclusion that health tourism activities are intensifying in Türkiye (Uysal Şahin & Şahin, 2018). Today, too the number and income of health tourists continues to increase. In the first quarter of 2023, 5% of tourists has travelled to Türkiye for health purposes and health expenditures of tourists increased by 10.8% compared to the same period of the previous year. In the 2nd quarter of 2023, 2.4% of tourists travelled to Türkiye for health purposes and health expenditures of tourists has decreased by 5.3% compared to the same period of the previous year. In the 3rd quarter of the same year, 1.2% of tourists travelled to Türkiye for health purposes and health expenditures of tourists increased by 4.2% compared to the same period of the previous year (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2023). In parallel with these increases, an annual income of 10 billion dollars is targeted from health tourism in the centenary of the republic (Uysal Şahin & Şahin, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The research aims to determine whether the health tourism activities offered in Türkiye are distributed homogeneously throughout the country and, in case of differences, to make suggestions to eliminate regional differences and activate regional investment projects. This study will provide an

idea about the social, economic, and image benefits of determining the health tourism activities of the cities, completing the missing health service activities, and comparing the cities among themselves, to Türkiye's health tourism.

It aims to examine the current potential of the 7 most developed cities selected among the 7 geographical regions of Türkiye in terms of health tourism and to reveal their strengths and weaknesses. While determining the most developed provinces of the 7 geographical regions, the most recent socio-economic development ranking survey of the provinces conducted periodically by the Türkiye Statistical Institute and the General Directorate of Development Agencies was taken as a basis. Since the General Directorate of Development Agencies conducted the latest provincial survey in 2017, the population of the provinces in 2022 was brought to the forefront. For this reason, Istanbul was selected from the Marmara Region, Ankara from the Central Anatolia Region, Izmir from the Aegean Region, Antalya from the Mediterranean Region, Samsun from the Black Sea Region, and Van from the Eastern Anatolia Region. In the Southeastern Anatolia Region, since the populations of Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa are close to each other, Gaziantep was preferred considering the socio-economic development ranking survey (Kalkınma Ajansları Genel Müdürlüğü, 2017; Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2022).

In thermal tourism, which is one of the types of health tourism, facilities are established around natural resources, while in types of health tourism such as medical and elderly-disabled tourism, facilities are established around the human elements of cities. In this respect, the results of the research will pave the way for studies that can be done from a human perspective against the inadequate health tourism activities in various regions of Türkiye. The research will be created by compiling studies such as theses, articles, papers, etc. that have been previously done in the literature.

Importance of Research

Previous studies in the national literature on health tourism in Türkiye have been limited SWOT analysis, local activities and types of health tourism. There is a lack of resources in the literature on the areas of concentration and types of health tourism in Türkiye. This study, which was written in order to complete this missing area, will determine the health tourism activities carried out throughout Türkiye and the data obtained will determine whether health tourism is homogeneously distributed throughout the country. In order to ensure the normal distribution of heterogeneously distributed health tourism types, various solution suggestions will be presented. This text, which will be the first study conducted in the literature, will give the public an idea the public for too be done more intensive and more effective health tourism activities in Türkiye. Thus, more tourists and income will be obtained on behalf of Türkiye to reach its health tourism targets.

Istanbul (Marmara Region)

Located in the Marmara region of our country, Istanbul province is the most populous city of Türkiye, connecting the Asian and European continents. Istanbul, a world brand, also connects the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea via the Bosphorus. Istanbul's surface area is 5712 km² and the cultural and historical heritage of having hosted various civilizations for centuries offers unique beauty to humanity. The city, which was founded approximately 8500 years ago, hosts tourists from many countries of the world every year, thanks to its cultural richness, and thus the tourism sector in Istanbul has developed. Istanbul, visited by approximately 15 million tourists in 2019, has various

tourism opportunities. It is possible to say that Istanbul is in a very advantageous position in terms of health tourism, which is one of these types of tourism (Istanbul Valiliği, 2023).

As of 11.10.2023, there are 186 hospitals and 511 agencies with health tourism authorization certificates in Istanbul (Sağlık Turizmi Dairesi Başkanlığı, 2023). Health tourists mostly work with travel agencies when choosing Istanbul. At the same time, these preferences of health tourists are shaped by issues such as technological infrastructure, hospital and specialist quality, and health facility selection is made in the minds within the framework of searches by these criteria. When we look at the countries of origin of the tourists who prefer Istanbul for healthcare services, we see mostly citizens of the Middle East and Africa, Turkish citizens living abroad, and citizens from the Turkish republics (Kadioğlu, 2021). According to 2020 data, among the health tourists coming to our country, tourists from Libya, Azerbaijan, and Iraq preferred Istanbul the most. While these individuals mostly prefer Istanbul for aesthetic operations, the reasons for this preference include price suitability, geographical proximity, and similarity in terms of belief (Alacahan, 2021).

It should be kept in mind that while the number of specialized physicians in Istanbul is higher than in other cities, the number of non-physician personnel is lower than in other cities. Despite having adequate equipment, Istanbul public hospitals follow Istanbul private hospitals in terms of the number of health tourists hosted in the same period (Alacahan, 2021). Istanbul is mostly preferred for medical health tourism within the scope of health tourism. Accordingly, approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the hospitals have international patient departments. The service of remote monitoring of the post-treatment health status of the tourist after returning to his/her country after the treatment process is completed continues in most of the hospitals in Istanbul (84.9%). This situation increases the satisfaction and confidence of the patients (Buzcu & Birdir, 2018).

Advantages of Istanbul

- The glamour of Istanbul being a world-brand city,
- Having package holiday advantages due to the high number of touristic places in Istanbul
- Istanbul has the largest airport in the country and the number of flights is sufficient
- Istanbul is at the forefront in terms of high-value-added surgeries
- Istanbul is one of the first cities where Turkish citizens who will receive health services from abroad will set foot
- A large number of hospitals in compliance with JCI quality standards
- Foreign language skills of a large proportion of health workers (Zengingönül et al., 2012).

Disadvantages of Istanbul

- Coordination between hospitals, NGOs, and agencies has not yet been achieved one hundred percent
- Lack of price standardization in hospitals (Zengingönül et al., 2012).

Ankara (Interior Anatolia Region)

Consisting of 25 districts and 1432 neighborhoods, Ankara is the capital of the Republic of Türkiye. The population of Ankara has increased over the years as a result of internal migration and according to 2015 data, the population was recorded as 5.270.000 people. Migration due to the increase in state organization and industrial activities has made the city the 2nd most populous city in Türkiye (Ankara Valiliği, 2023).

As of 11.10.2023, Ankara has 53 hospitals and 107 intermediary organizations with health tourism authorization certificates (Sağlık Turizmi Dairesi Başkanlığı, 2023). These institutions and organizations are staffed by qualified people with expert experience in their field. For example, the provision of interpreting services in many health facilities in the city has turned the capital into a center of attraction for health tourists. On the other hand, Ankara's natural resources as well as its human resources are highly utilised in health tourism. In this context, the fact that Ankara is rich in underground geothermal resources has led to the development of the city in terms of thermal tourism. Kızılcahamam, Haymana, and Ayaş are the districts of Ankara that stand out with their thermal facilities. Recreation and accommodation services are also provided in these facilities (Ankara Kalkınma Ajansı, 2019). Ankara is also among the leading cities in terms of advanced-age tourism, which is another type of health tourism. Ankara is ahead of many metropolises in satisfaction surveys directed to tourists and employees who benefit from these facilities (Sözeri, 2023).

The chairman of the board of directors of the Ankara Chamber of Commerce (ATO) also drew attention to the issue of health tourism. He emphasized that health tourism is a field that is growing by the minute with the Health Transformation Programme (SDP) and that Ankara is one of the leading cities in health tourism. In this context, Ankara's health tourism targets for 2023 include reaching 2 million tourists and becoming the capital of health tourism (Ankara Ticaret Odası, 2018). When the countries of the health tourists coming to Ankara are analyzed, it is seen that Iraqi, Azerbaijani, and Syrian citizens are at the forefront. Eye, dental, and cardiac surgery are the most preferred branches for the treatment of health tourists coming to the city (Örs, 2020). In Ankara, which is also a highly demanded city for orthopedics and other surgical branches, private hospitals hosting health tourists in Ankara have mainly English and Arabic translators, and the fact that these hospitals have websites with different language options is of great interest to tourists (İşbaşıar, 2016).

Advantages of Ankara

- 10 years of ongoing health investments
- Attractiveness of location and transport options
- Visa-free travel or visa facilitation
- Health organizations have been provided to a significant extent (İşbaşıar, 2016).
- Having the country's leading university (Hacettepe, ...) and city hospitals (Bilkent, Etlik)
- Health tourists can only prefer Istanbul and Ankara within the scope of a bilateral agreement
- Official institutions (embassy, consulate, SSI, ...) are located in the capital
- Ankara is rich in geothermal underground geothermal resources, with approximately 8000 beds in 34 thermal facilities

- 15 physiotherapy and rehabilitation centers, 51 nursing homes and elderly care centers, and a total of 86 disabled rooms in hotels are promising in terms of advanced age and disabled tourism
- Having 4 hospitals with JCI certification (Kanıgür Yüksek, 2021).

Disadvantages of Ankara

- Failure to combine Ankara with other types of tourism
- Insufficient promotion of the thermal tourism potential in the districts
- Limited social activities
- Lack of international flights as much as Istanbul (Kanıgür Yüksek, 2021).

Izmir (Aegean Region)

Located on the west coast of Türkiye, Izmir is a city of industry, trade, agriculture, and tourism. Izmir is the largest city in the Aegean region and the 3rd largest city in the country. With its 8500 years of history and 629 km of coastline combined with the climate conditions, Izmir offers great potential in terms of tourism diversity. Providing health services to humanity for centuries, the city hosted many famous treatment centers such as Agamemnon and Asclepion. This shows that Izmir is a city rich in thermal tourism facilities. These facilities welcome visitors from many countries around the world, especially from Northern countries (İzmir İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2023).

There are 53 hospitals and 62 intermediary organizations that are certified for health tourism in Izmir as of 11.10.2023 (Sağlık Turizmi Dairesi Başkanlığı, 2023). The data provided in 2012 shows that Izmir is mostly preferred for dental and orthopedic operations in medical tourism. On the other hand, among the hospital selection criteria for foreign health tourists, the presence of an accreditation certificate is at the forefront. In this context, Dokuz Eylül University Hospital, which has a clinic with 40 different branches and hotel-quality services, is one of the locomotive hospitals of Izmir. Transportation facilities and coordinated work with local non-governmental organizations are among the advantages of this hospital (Sayın et al., 2017).

Although İzmir's application for EXPO 2020 candidacy ended in a negative outcome, the emphasis on the theme of "health" in this process contributed to the promotion of the city's health services. In addition, Izmir's underground resources have greatly enhanced the city's thermal tourism. In this context, the availability of 5-star hotels and the possibility of providing spa-wellness services in these facilities have contributed to the city's health tourism diversity (Daştan, 2014).

Advantages of Izmir:

- Having 6 medical faculties as of 2015
- Izmir's geography offers the opportunity to combine health tourism with other types of tourism
- Implementation of a competitive price policy in health facilities
- The health technopark established within Dokuz Eylül University will contribute to various promotional activities

- A health-free zone project is planned to be established in the city
- Utilization of ancient healing water resources, the most famous of which are the temples of Asclepion, within the scope of thermal tourism
- The possibility of benefiting from Seferihisar, which has the title of Sakin City, in terms of elderly tourism (Mirza, 2015).

Disadvantages of Izmir:

- Lack of adequate foreign language skills of health personnel
- The airport in Izmir has few international flights and there are many connecting flights (Mirza, 2015).

Antalya (Mediterranean Region)

Antalya is a world-renowned tourism city with the potential to become a leader in health tourism (Türkiye Kültür Portalı, 2018). With around 2.5 million inhabitants, Antalya is one of the largest cities in Türkiye, bordering the Mediterranean Sea on the southern strip of the country (Antalya İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2023). Between January 1 and August 22, 2023, the number of tourists visiting the city by air increased by 20% compared to 2022, reaching 10 million 64 thousand 782 (T.C Antalya Valiliği, 2023). Although sea tourism is the priority in the city, alternative tourism activities such as highland and sports tourism are also carried out, especially in the Alanya district. To sustain these and other types of tourism, the district needs more resources and infrastructure (Kuzkaya, 2023).

Antalya receives tourists mostly from countries such as Russia, Germany, and the UK (Antalya İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2023). The fact that agencies, health institutions, and all other related organizations in the region work in harmony with each other and have an infrastructure that can meet the needs of health tourists makes Antalya an important destination in this sense. For this reason, Antalya stands out as a city that offers favorable conditions for the accommodation of the sick, elderly, and disabled, especially during the low season. When evaluated in this direction, Antalya has a very important position in health tourism as well as in alternative tourism types such as winter tourism, sports tourism, congress, and fair tourism (Türkiye Kültür Portalı, 2018).

There are 48 hospitals in Antalya, including 18 public, 2 university, and 28 private hospitals (Antalya İl Sağlık Müdürlüğü, 2021). The fact that MedStar Antalya Hospital, one of these hospitals, is accredited by the Joint Commission International (JCI) and that Antalya's third and Türkiye's fifth face transplant was performed at Akdeniz University Hospital on 19.07.2013 contributed to the promotion of the city (Yalçın, 2013). Many successful operations have been admired by the whole world (Sarı & Ulusoy Derin, 2019). In line with these developments in both private and public hospitals, Antalya has managed to come to the forefront in many other fields such as eye, dental, and nephrology, and has become a brand in the fields of hair transplantation and plastic surgery, especially for people from Gulf countries (Türkiye Kültür Portalı, 2018). Additionally, it was recorded that 17,039 health tourists received treatment at Alanya Training and Research Hospital, which is one of the important hospitals in the city, in 2021 (Özkan, 2022).

Advantages of Antalya

- A well-developed airport with direct flights to many countries

- Recognized and preferred in the field of general tourism
- More accommodation options
- As the city with the highest number of visitors coming for alternative tourism, it stands out in many tourism types such as winter tourism, sports tourism, congress tourism, and fair tourism.
- Offering affordable prices and high-quality service as well as vacation package options
- 4 seasons of the mild climate, enable disabled and elderly tourism
- The waiting time to receive health services is much shorter than in European countries
- The city has historical and natural beauty.
- Having world-renowned doctors and hospitals (Özdemir, 2021).

Disadvantages of Antalya

- Lack of trained personnel in health tourism
- Inadequacies in advertising and marketing
- Problems with foreign language
- Non-homogeneous distribution of health tourism activities across the province
- Inadequate utilization of the 4-season mild climate opportunity
- The image of the city is more in the direction of mass tourism and sea, sand, and sun vacation.
- Low number of medical institutions with JCI or similar international hospital accreditation (Sulku, 2017).

Samsun (Black Sea Region)

With a population of 1,209,137, Samsun is the largest province of the Black Sea Region and thanks to the advantage of being a coastal city, alternative tourism activities such as sea and golf tourism are carried out. Besides, many other alternative tourism activities such as winter, plateau, and heritage tourism are also carried out (Şahin & Yılmaz, 2009).

In Samsun, where health services were provided to citizens of 146 different countries in various branches throughout 2022, local administrators carried out various activities to develop health tourism. The governor of Samsun, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zülküf Dağlı drew attention to the increasing health investments and stated that the affordable price policy together with the expert staff increased the interest in Samsun. Dağlı also stated that the flights to Iraq and Kuwait in certain periods of the year and the road access to Georgia and Azerbaijan can also increase this interest (T.C. Samsun Valiliği, 2023).

Samsun province has a total of 34 hospitals, 23 of which are public, 9 private, and 2 university hospitals (Samsun İl Sağlık Müdürlüğü, 2023). As of 18.11.2023, the number of facilities with health tourism authorization certificates in Samsun is 31 (Sağlık Turizmi Dairesi Başkanlığı, 2023). Among the reasons for the arrival of health tourists to Samsun, benefiting from medical tourism has an

important place (Gül, 2019). The most common visitors to Samsun within the scope of medical tourism are Iraq, Azerbaijan, Germany, the Netherlands, and Georgia citizens. Samsun also has an important potential in terms of thermal tourism, which is another type of health tourism. For example, there are many hot springs in the Havza district center, which is approximately one hour away from Samsun, and the fact that these hot springs are located on Samsun Ankara highway has made transportation quite easy (Şahin & Yılmaz, 2009). According to the determinations made by the Ministry of Health, these thermal waters contain steel, silica, and sodium calcium minerals. The idea that these minerals will be good for rheumatism and neurological diseases has increased the interest of individuals in thermal springs (T.C Havza Kaymakamlığı, 2023). In addition, this therapy service attracts great interest in Samsun Training and Research Hospital, which is the only peloid therapy (mud therapy) center in the Black Sea region (Samsun Eğitim ve Araştırma Hastanesi, 2023).

Advantages of Samsun

- The fact that the climate is suitable for health tourism due to its mild summers and mild winters (Yılmaz & Zeybek, 2016).
- Adequate accommodation facilities
- The infrastructure of health facilities is favorable for health tourism
- Having doctors specialized in their field
- Health service costs are favorable for health tourists
- Health centers have sufficient technological equipment
- Being close to Russia, Caucasian countries and Middle Eastern countries (Özışık Yapıcı, 2021).

Disadvantages of Samsun

- Few direct flights from abroad
- Inadequate promotion and advertisement of private hospitals
- Challenges in the organization of health tourism
- Lack of sufficient experience in the sector
- Inadequate branding
- Insufficient health personnel trained in foreign languages (Demir & Sağlık, 2020).

Gaziantep (Southeast Anatolian Region)

Located in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Türkiye, Gaziantep has a population of 2,154,051 according to the 2022 Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) Address Based Population Registration System data (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2022). With a 6000-year history, Gaziantep's geopolitical position as a transit point between the Middle East and Anatolia makes the city logistically important. The city, which has an important position in gastronomy and cultural tourism, has 56 hotels with tourism management certificates and a total of 163,497 foreign tourists stayed in these facilities in 2022 (Gaziantep İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2023).

There are a total of 6,265 beds and 1,489 intensive care beds in 31 hospitals in Gaziantep (T.C Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2019). Most of the visitors to Gaziantep within the scope of health tourism are citizens of countries in the Middle East and Europe. Therefore, the target group in health tourism is mainly the citizens of these countries. Although Gaziantep does not have any hospital accredited by JCI, various operations such as cornea transplantation, kidney transplantation, gynecological cancer surgeries, and ear implants are carried out at Gaziantep University Hospital within the scope of medical health tourism. Health tourists from countries such as Germany, the USA, Israel, Palestine, and Tunisia visit Gaziantep for various procedures (Gaziantep Üniversitesi Haber Merkezi, 2023).

Advantages of Gaziantep

- The international terminal is located at the airport
- Proximity to the Middle East countries in terms of location
- Cost-effective for health tourists
- Well-known food and beverage culture
- The presence of competent experts in the field
- Proximity to historical and touristic centers in the region (Birdir et al., 2015).

Disadvantages of Gaziantep

- Lack of qualified personnel with foreign language skills
- Stakeholders participating in health tourism do not have sufficient technical infrastructure
- Lack of doctors working in the field of health tourism
- Lack of JCI-accredited hospitals
- Lack of adequate marketing and promotion
- Lack of technical equipment and labor force
- Lack of direction signs in the facilities due to the language options of the predominantly arriving country citizens (Buzcu & Birdir, 2019).

Van (Eastern Anatolian Region)

Van province, which has a population of 1,128,749 in the Eastern Anatolia Region, has important rivers, fertile lands, and Van Lake (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2022; Van İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2023). As of 16.11.2023, there are 5 hospitals, 1 medical center, and 1 agency with a health tourism authorization certificate (Sağlık Turizmi Dairesi Başkanlığı, 2023). Several researches have been conducted to examine the health tourism potential of Van. In this context, local authorities have identified Istanbul and Kocaeli as the target markets in Türkiye, while Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, and Iraq have been identified as target markets abroad (Doğu Anadolu Kalkınma Ajansı, 2016). In countries such as Iraq and Georgia, the lack of advanced medical technology, lack of specialized personnel, and low quality of service are among the push factors for the citizens of those countries (Moghimehfar & Nasr-Esfahani, 2011).

Van Yüzüncü Yıl University Odabaş Medical Centre welcomes patients from countries such as

Azerbaijan, Iraq and Georgia. Having a 730-bed capacity university hospital with a "health tourism unit" has contributed to the development of health tourism in Van (TRT Haber, 2021). In addition, Van has an important potential in subject thermal tourism. There is a great geothermal potential in the Zilan Stream Valley next to the Hasanabdal Hot Spring in Van-Erçiş (Elmastaş, 2013). With the support of the Eastern Anatolia Development Agency, a facility has been opened in the Çaldıran district of Van for the utilization of geothermal resources. This facility is expected to contribute to Van's health tourism (Doğu Anadolu Kalkınma Ajansı, 2016).

Advantages of Van

- Having a university hospital with competent physicians in the field
- Bordering countries in need of health services
- The existence of an airport with international flights
- Becoming well-known in neighboring countries, especially in the field of plastic surgery
- Offering more cost-effective treatments compared to competitor countries
- Having natural and historical beauties (Doğu Anadolu Kalkınma Ajansı, 2016).

Disadvantages of Van

- Inability to make introductions effectively,
- Failure of health tourism stakeholders to organize among themselves
- Deficiencies in the infrastructure of the facilities and the need for renewal of medical devices,
- An insufficient number of specialists trained in the field of health tourism who are experienced and have foreign language skills (Alaeddinoğlu, et al., 2013).

DISCUSSION

Within the scope of the research, health tourism activities of seven developed cities selected from seven regions of Türkiye are analyzed. Based on this, the homogeneity of the distribution of each type of health tourism across the country will be determined and several solution proposals will be developed for heterogeneously distributed health tourism types. In the literature, no national distribution comparison has been made for all health tourism activities. The studies carried out at local and regional scales are as follows;

In Icoz (2009)'s study, it was reported that eye surgeries are carried out within the scope of medical tourism with package programs in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions, and those who have eye surgery in Istanbul later go on holiday to the Aegean and Mediterranean regions. In the study of Turan Kurtaran et al. (2019) the medical tourism potential of Trabzon province was mentioned. In Taskın and Sener (2013)'s study, thermal tourism activities in Kütahya were examined and health institutions in the province were mentioned. In Kahraman (1991)'s study, it was reported that thermal tourism is concentrated in Yalova, Gönen, Çeşme, and Balçova. Bozca et al. (2017) examined the SWOT analysis of health tourism activities of Erzincan province and mentioned thermal facilities such as Eksisu (Böğert Mineral Water), Horhor healing pool, and Erzincan thermal spring in the city. In Tapan (2022)'s study, the contribution of Malatya-İspendere thermal spring to health tourism was mentioned. In Demir and Sezgin (2020)'s study, the health tourism potential of Elazığ province was

examined with a SWOT analysis, and famous thermal facilities in the city were identified. In the study in which Yorulmaz and Soyler (2020) examined the medical tourism potential of Adana province with SWOT analysis, accreditation documents and bed numbers of city hospitals, medical schools, private hospitals, and organizations were mentioned.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Health tourism activities have continued to be carried out intensively in Türkiye. Within the scope of this original research, the health tourism activities of 7 developed cities were analyzed and inferences were made about the health tourism activities of the regions.

As a result of the opportunities provided by Istanbul and the Marmara Region being the most developed region of Türkiye, health tourism has also developed considerably. The presence of a large number of hospitals in parallel with the dense population in the region has developed medical tourism activities. The fact that fault lines pass through the south of the region makes Yalova, Sakarya, Balıkesir and Bursa stand out in terms of thermal facilities. These types of tourism are limited in Marmara due to the shift of elderly-disabled and spa-wellness tourists to coastal regions where the population is less.

The fact that Türkiye's capital is located in Interior Anatolia Region has concentrated health tourism in and around Ankara. Thanks to the advantage of being the capital, the consulates of various countries, Esenboğa Airport and the country's best university hospitals are located here, increasing the city's attractiveness in health tourism. The number of nursing homes and elderly care centers and good service quality increase the region's capacity for elderly and disabled tourism. On the other hand, thermal tourism has developed in cities such as Aksaray, Kayseri, Ankara and Nevşehir in the region.

Since almost all of the Aegean Region is underlain by fractured fault lines, thermal facilities are densely populated in the region. Medical tourism is widespread in the region's coastal cities, with Dokuz Eylül University and Ege University Hospitals performing some of the region's most important surgical procedures. Hotels offering spa-wellness and elderly-disabled tourism services above Türkiye's average are similarly concentrated along the region's coastline.

Thanks to the advantage of the climate, the Mediterranean Region is dense in terms of hotels offering advanced age-disabled tourism and spa-wellness services. Incoming tourists benefit from the sea, sand, sun trio and package holiday advantages. In medical tourism, many important hospitals that have made a name for themselves, such as Akdeniz University, are located in the vicinity of Antalya in the west of the region, while thermal tourism activities have become widespread in the vicinity of Hatay in the east of the region due to the fault lines.

The Black Sea region is not favourable for elderly-disabled and spa-wellness tourism due to cloudy days and high rainfall. However, thermal tourism activities have become widespread in cities such as Bolu, which is located in the interior of the region. Medical tourism is intensively carried out in training and research hospitals located in developed coastal cities such as Samsun and Trabzon.

Due to the high altitude and ruggedness of the Eastern Anatolia Region, transport and climate conditions make health tourism very difficult. The most common health tourism activity in the region is thermal facilities and is widely being realised throughout the region. The hospitals of cities such as Van, Malatya and Erzurum are the leading hospitals in the region and medical tourism activities

are carried out in these centres. Other types of health tourism are quite limited.

The most important hospitals of the South Eastern Anatolia Region are located in Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa and Gaziantep. Gaziantep University Hospital has made a name for itself and performs important surgeries for patients from the countries in the region. While thermal tourism, which is one of the other types of health tourism, has not developed due to natural reasons, spa-wellness and advanced age-disabled tourism have not developed due to the disadvantage of being an inland region.

Medical tourism is widespread in all regions of Türkiye but it has been determined that surgical procedures are carried out more extensively in the west of the country in terms of quality and number. Since thermal tourism activities are dependent on underground resources, facilities have been established in parallel with the fault lines in the country. In this respect, thermal tourism activities are carried out in the Aegean, Central Anatolia, Eastern Anatolia, South Marmara, and partially in the Black Sea Region. Individuals coming to our country within the scope of advanced age and disabled tourism choose facilities by taking into account the physical and climatic conditions. In this respect, the capital Ankara and its surroundings, which is a Mediterranean and administrative city with a mild climate, are intensively preferred within the scope of elderly and disabled tourism. Spa-Wellness tourism includes various cure treatments and these applications have become widespread mostly in hotels in the Aegean Region. To homogenise the heterogeneous distribution of health tourism types in Türkiye, we make the following suggestions;

- Promotion and visa facilitation should be provided to ensure that individuals bordering countries enter our country to receive health services from our border cities.
- Necessary technological infrastructure and specialized staff should be provided for intensive medical tourism in the eastern regions.
- Although thermal tourism is dependent on underground resources, tourism packages should be co-operated with other regions.
- The necessary hotel and facility investments should be increased to ensure that elderly and disabled tourism is carried out not only in the Mediterranean and the capital but also in the Aegean, Marmara, and Black Sea Regions where the climate is favorable.
- Appropriate hotel concepts should be created for Spa-Wellness tourism in all regions.
- Health tourism and alternative tourism activities should be combined in all regions (e.g. with sea tourism in coastal regions, with winter tourism in Eastern Anatolia, with cultural tourism in Central Anatolia and Southeastern Anatolia).
- Funding incentives for local organizations in the regions should be increased.
- The development agencies of the regions should cooperate in various ways.

The results of this study, which determines the homogeneity of ongoing health tourism activities in Türkiye on a national scale, offer some solution suggestions for the diversification and development of health tourism. This study, which will shed light on future research on this subject, needs comprehensive research involving more provinces.

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