

## **Strategies for Development of Iran Health Tourism**

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### **Abstract**

Tourism industry of any country consists of different forms of tourism for which matching and adaptation of strategies with the nature of destination is necessary, because provided policies and strategies for development of each form of tourism in any country are different and sometimes even opposite. Health tourism as one the most important forms of tourism is not an exception and preparing strategies for its development will not be possible without considering its specific and extraordinary environment. The object of preparing and writing this article is to formulate suitable strategies for Iran health tourism in a three phase framework consisting of input, matching and decision levels. Provided instruments and techniques in this framework are suitable for different levels of strategic planning (e.g. local, urban, regional, and so on). Also this research is applied in target and the subjects are technical managers of tourism agencies in the country and data is gathered by designing and distribution of questionnaire. Provided instruments and techniques in this framework are suitable for different levels of strategic planning (e.g. local, urban, regional, and so on). Also this research is applied in target and the subjects are all technical managers of tourism agencies in the country and data is gathered by designing and distribution of questionnaire. Surveys show that health tourism is one of the important forms of tourism in Iran and can attract a large number of domestic and foreign tourists. Results indicate that aggressive strategies are in the first priority; in addition, considering lots of strengths of the industry penetration in market, and development of products is also suggested among other aggressive strategies. Determining and prioritization of Iran health tourism strategies are some practical results of this article.

**Keywords:** Health Tourism, Strategic Planning, TOPSIS, Forms of tourism, aggressive strategies, Iran Health Tourism.

### **1. Introduction**

Tourism or traveling for recreation is one of the big industries and economic sectors in the world and one of the most important resources of foreign exchange and job opportunities. Most of the governments consider tourism as a guideline for development of the country, because of the multiplier effect of tourism income, in which foreign exchange provided by tourists will commence expending for local products and services. Besides, because of the economic importance of the tourism and its role in alleviating economic crisis, most of the governments consider tourism as a guideline for development of the country and this industry makes more importance every day. Iran, as one of the developing countries, has a big share of tourism industry and has potential to become a top destination.

Developing and enhancing tourism without guiding framework and pre-determined strategies for achieving development goals and in ad hoc manner is impossible [1]. Health tourism, with a focus on good health, wellbeing and its pursuit, is not a new phenomenon [2]. Health tourism is any pleasure-orientated travel which involves an element of stress relief which makes it an enjoyable and relaxing activity [3].

Puczkó and Bachvarov similarly refer to seven dimensions of wellness social, physical, emotional, intellectual, environmental, spiritual and occupational [4]. Tourism can contribute to lots of the dimensions of wellness. Equally, tourists need to be in good enough physical health as well as being materially affluent to embark on a journey [5]. Health tourism involves travelers who look for light medical treatment to improve their body or travel to experience healing therapies.

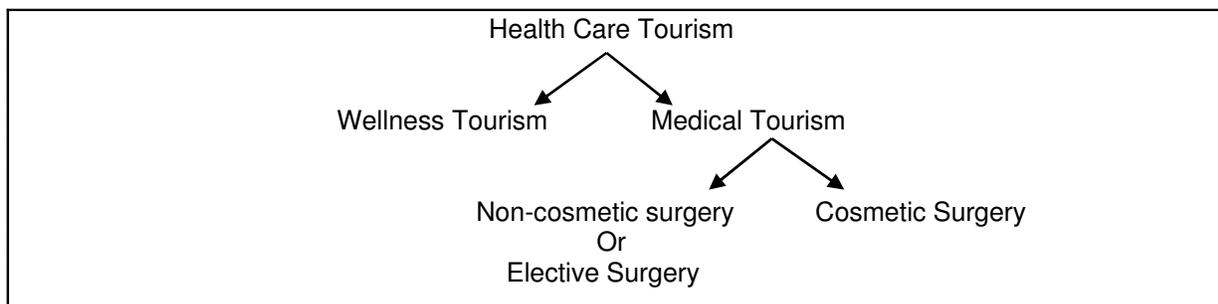
A person who looks for wellness experience is generally healthy in start and seeks treatment to maintain his well-being. Health tourism generally includes one or more of the following: spa visits, fitness programs, light medical, dental or beauty treatment, spiritual guidance, nutritional services and many different alternative therapies derived from different cultures.

The number of wellness, treatment, spas, and pilgrimage centers, complementary and alternative therapies is unprecedentedly increasing [6]. Health tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism if we consider the attention paid to well-being by Romans and Greeks, the search for spiritual awareness by mediaeval pilgrims, or spa tourism of the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> century European élite [6]. Depression is usually cited as one of the most widespread diseases of the 21st century and suicide rates are rising, especially among young men [7]. Like most of the other forms of tourism, the flows of people are from more developed to less developed countries, but the recent trend is for western travelers to seek solace in Eastern therapies (e.g., Chinese medicine, Buddhist meditation, Indian Ayurveda and Thai massage). Although such alternatives are common in many Western societies, but tourists are inclined to visit the origin of the practice [5].

Health tourism is all the relationships resulting from change of location by people to promote stabilize or restore physical, mental and social well-being by using health services by people for whom the place where they are going is not their permanent place of residence or work [8]. Medical tourism is when international patients travel to other countries to receive healthcare and respond to their medical needs [9].

The structure of health care tourism [10] shows that health tourism includes Wellness Tourism and Medical Tourism (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** The structure of health care tourism



Adopting strategic planning to tourism development is necessary, because most of the times after observation and emersion of tourism development and undesired social and environmental effects, it takes a long time to alleviate the undesired effects or control the process of development. There are several examples of tourism destinations affected by negative and undesired impacts of tourism development. Negative impacts are usually because of the lack of tourism development plans. So preparing tourism planning is necessary to compensate negative effects of tourism in destinations [11].

Strategic planning refers to the process of creating long-term conformity between managerial targets and changing market opportunities. All practices and operations related to tourism must be done on the basis of strategic plan. Strategic planning of tourism industry makes the governments able to recognize strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and apply these findings to improve and enhance the benefits of tourism industry. Strategic planning based on the business or environment of tourism, has an important role in developing tourism industry, which is one of the most important catalyzers of economic development of countries and results in the long-term conformity between business goals and opportunities and sustainable market opportunities. So governments can gain competitive advantage by preparing strategies which are applicable in market.

In 1995, a World Bank report on the potential for health tourism in the Caribbean recommended that the Caribbean should focus on developing certain niches and identified the major constraining factors such as poor state of health infrastructure and lack of management capacity. These constraints meant that the growth of health tourism should be done so as to capitalize on the assets upon which the tourism industry and other services are built i.e. proximity and access to the target markets, relatively strong intellectual capital, an established hospitality industry, and ambient environment [12].

Hansruedi Mueller and Eveline Lanz Kaufmann in an article titled as "Wellness Tourism: Market analysis of a special health tourism segment and implications for the hotel industry"[13] stress on Quality management Target markets, Supply shaping, Pricing, Communication, Distribution and Cooperation for wellness hotels, spa resorts, tourist associations, health insurance companies and tourism and health policy-makers.

Anthony Gonzales, Logan Brenzel and Jennifer Sancho in "Health Tourism and Related Services: Caribbean Development and International Trade" [14] state that a potential local private sector investor in health, in describing their experience of developing the project identifies the following internal barriers: Lack of incentives for investment in the health sector, Poorly developed business and management perspective among health providers, fragmented framework for investment, Lack of transparency in the process for approval of appropriate sites, Lack of support from the public sector in terms of facilitating entry, joint planning and defining standards and Lack of health specific management skills. This would need to be perhaps sourced externally and limited capacity to see larger implications of globalization/liberalization of health market and Control of the local market.

Zahra Kezemi in a thesis titled as "Study of the effective factors for attracting medical tourism in Iran" [15] state fast preparation of visa for medical patients and their relatives, offering residential and recreational facilities for relatives of patients, enhancing cooperation between tourism organizations, diversification of medical tourism services, enhancing the quality and lowering the costs can facilitate the development of medical tourism.

About 1000 spa exist in Iran [16]. Geographical position of Iran, the history of medical sciences and low-cost and high quality health services, has led to the importance of medical tourism [15]. In addition it includes 12000 hospital beds and 4551 laboratories, 3042 rehabilitation center, 2293 radiology and imaging centers and 7601 pharmacies are providing health services in Iran [17], but despite all these potentials, Iran has not been able to attract a high volume of health tourists, because of the lack of appropriate planning.

Planning for tourism development in Iran has started from 1858 but because of prioritization of other plans and existence of oil and other resources, this industry has been neglected and the need for formulating strategies has been never felt.

In today's complicated world, defining and determining the geographical area and the forms of tourists for whom the tourism policy will be performed, is of considerable importance. There are different kinds of tourism destinations in Iran and different forms of tourists need different policies and strategies. That's why adaption of the presented policies to the nature of the destination is a crucial matter.

## 2. Research Methodology

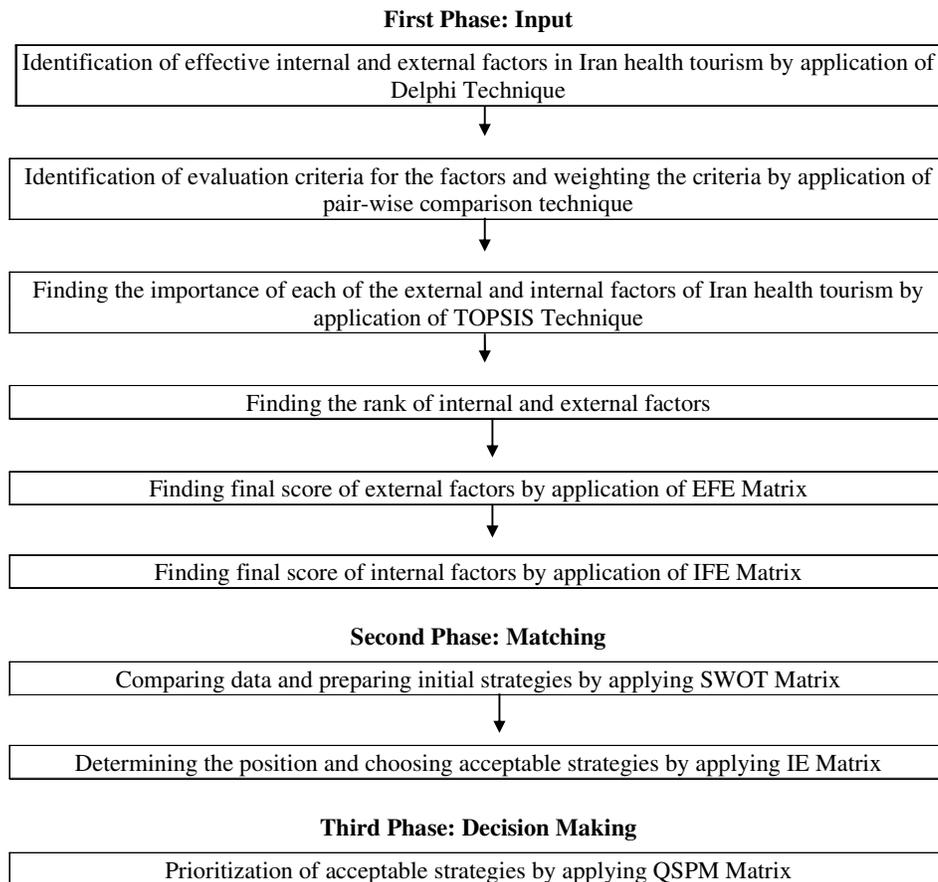
The present study is of descriptive research type. It is considered as applied type in terms of objective. The present study is a survey research type in terms of collecting the data. Therefore, collection of information and data has been made through studying books and documents. For obtaining necessary information at this study, required data have been collected through library-based studies, questionnaire and obtaining data from resources and documents (for provision of study theoretical fundamentals).

### 2.1. Research Model

Basic methods of preparing health tourism strategies can be included in a three phase framework including input, adaptation and decision making. The first phase of preparing strategies includes reorganization of effective internal and external factors in the forms of tourism by applying pair-wise technique.

Before applying EFE and IFE matrix to find the final score of Iran health tourism industry, we calculate the degree of importance of each factor by applying TOPSIS technique and the degree of reaction (rank) of health tourism to the factors by administration of questionnaire. In the first phase (input), basic data for preparation of strategies is collected. In the second (matching) stage, different forms of possible strategies are considered and for doing this, balance is made between external and internal factors. Techniques applied in the second phase include strengths- weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) matrix and internal and external matrix (IE). (Diagram 1)

**Diagram 1:** Strategic Framework to Formulate Strategy



## **2.2. Subject, Sample and Sampling Method**

All technical managers of tourism companies are subject of the preset study. In this study sample volume is calculated by application of Morgan table and equals 1000 persons according to reports presented in Euromonitor 2009 report [18] about the number of active travel agencies. The number of sample of this study amounts to 278 persons. The reason for choosing them is that they have enough experience in related matters and are well acquainted with different forms of tourism and internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external environment (opportunities and threats) of tourism industry of Iran. Random classified sampling method was used and one technical manager is selected from each company.

## **2.3. Validity & Reliability, Measuring Tools**

At the present study, library based study was applied for preparation of theoretical basis and recording previous studies, and questionnaire is used for determining the effective factors and degree of reaction of tourism industry to these factors.

Provided initial questionnaire was given to university professors and experts in charge, with the aim of presenting their views on validity of questionnaire and whether questions posed at the questionnaire are appropriate or not.

Then, viewpoints of lecturers and officials in charge were considered at questionnaire and consequently, necessary changes were made at questions.

Cronbach's Alpha Test [19] was used for testing reliability of questionnaire of study. For this reason, 76 study questionnaires were distributed among subject (individuals set for this study). Then each answer was studied individually and response rate of each question was calculated. First, the rate of acquired responses was over 90% of the sample. Second, there was no question to which most of the 16 person group didn't answer or gave an unexpected response. In the same direction, Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test was made through the application of SPSS software package. Generally, test reliability rate was obtained 0.79 at large.

## **2.4. Method of Analysis**

### **2.4.1. Delphi**

Delphi method starts with identification of the problem and selected experts (Delphi panel) based on their experiment related to the defined problem. A questionnaire is designed and administered to the Delphi panel. Then data is collected and analyzed to reach consensus in responses. If the respondents have reached consensus a report is developed based on responses, if not a new questionnaire is developed based on the results of the previous round and again distributed to the panel. This process is repeated until consensus is reached and based on which a final report is developed [20].

### **2.4.2. Weighting the Criteria**

The basic procedure to carry out the pair-wise comparison consists of Prioritization of criteria by pair-wise comparison (weighing). Rating the relative priority of the criteria is done by assigning a weight between 1 (equal importance) and 9 (extreme importance) to the more important criterion, whereas the value reciprocal to that is assigned to the other criterion in the pair. The weightings are then assigned a number and averaged in order to obtain an average weight for each criterion [21].

### **2.4.3. TOPSIS**

For ranking and selecting the most appropriate suppliers, TOPSIS method is more appropriate due to the following reasons: in this technique, due to permission of desirability exchange between the attributes, it is possible to improve a supplier performance through its comparative advantage in some areas, despite its poor performance in other cases. In TOPSIS decision making technique, interaction effect of attributes is considered. This technique also considers Conflict and compatibility between

attributes [22, 23, 24, 25]. TOPSIS decision making technique is less sensitive compared to weighting technique. Considering the subjects covered in this study, compensating models and its constructive subgroup, TOPSIS technique, is used for evaluating and ranking the suppliers [26].

#### 2.4.4. EFE and IFE Matrixes

External Factor Evaluation (EFE) Matrix summarizes economic, social, cultural, demographic, environmental, political, governmental, legal, technological, and competitive information [27, 28, 29]. Internal Factor Evaluation Matrix (IFE) summarizes the major strengths and weaknesses in the functional areas of a business. Ratings and Weighted Scores are two important variables in IFE and EFE matrixes. Companies and industries rate each internal and external factor 1-to-4 in EFE and IFE Tables to indicate how effectively the firm's current strategies respond to the factor. Firms assign a weight from 0.0 to 1.0 to each internal and external factor in EFE and IFE Tables. Weights indicate the relative importance of that factor to being successful in the firm's industry.

#### 2.4.5. SWOT

Surveying internal and external environment is an important part of the strategic planning. Internal factors can be classified as strengths (S) or weaknesses (W), and external factors can be classified as opportunities (O) or threats (T). Such analysis of the strategic environment is referred to as SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis provides information that is helpful in matching the firm's resources and capabilities to the competitive environment. It is instrumental in strategy formulation and selection.

**Strength:** An internal competence, valuable resource or attribute that an organization can use to exploit opportunities in the external environment

**Weakness:** An internal lack of a competence, resource or attribute that an organization requires to perform in the external environment

**Opportunity:** An external possibility that an organization can pursue or exploit to gain benefit

**Threat:** An external factor that has the potential to reduce an organization's performance [30].

- **SO strategies:** pursue opportunities that are a good fit to the company's strengths.
- **WO strategies:** overcome weaknesses to pursue opportunities.
- **ST strategies:** identify the ways that the firm can use its strengths to reduce its vulnerability to external threats.
- **WT strategies:** establish a defensive plan to prevent the firm's weaknesses from making it highly susceptible to external threats [31].

#### 2.4.6. Internal-External (IE) Matrix

Internal-External (IE) Matrix positions an organization's various divisions in a nine cell display through plotting them in a schematic diagram. The size of each circle represents the percentage sales contribution of each division, and pie slices reveal the percentage profit contribution of each division in IE Matrix [21]. IE Matrix is based on two key dimensions: IFE total weighted scores on the x-axis and EFE total weighted scores on the y-axis. On the x-axis of the IE Matrix, an IFE total weighted score of 1.0 to 1.99 represents a weak internal position; a score of 2.0 to 2.99 is considered average; and a score of 3.0 to 4.0 is strong. Similarly, on the y-axis, an EFE total weighted score of 1.0 to 1.99 is considered low; a score of 2.0 to 2.99 is medium; and a score of 3.0 to 4.0 is high.

The IE Matrix can be divided into three major regions that have different strategy implications. First region gives the prescription of *grow and build* for divisions that fall into cells I, II, or IV. Intensive (market penetration, market development, and product development) or integrative (backward integration, forward integration, and horizontal integration) strategies can be most appropriate for these divisions. Second region gives the prescription of *hold and maintain* for divisions that fall into cells III, V, or VII. Market penetration and product development are two commonly employed strategies for these forms of divisions. Third region gives the prescription of *harvest or divest* for divisions that fall into cells VI, VIII, or IX. Liquidation, retrenchment and divestiture are

appropriate strategies for these divisions. Successful organizations are able to achieve a portfolio of businesses positioned in or around cell I in the IE Matrix [32].

## 2.5. Reorganization of Internal and External Factors in Iran Health Tourism

In the first phase internal and external factors of Iran health tourism were recognized by surveying literature review and research backgrounds. Then all the internal and external factors were analyzed carefully and most repeated and frequented factors in different researches were extracted. After administering 3 rounds of Delphi method, we acquired expert's attitudes and recognized strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats affecting Iran health tourism industry.

## 2.6. Reorganization and Weighting of Evaluative Criteria

Referring to literature review and research background, some criteria which are affecting Iran health tourism are recognized and then by administration of questionnaire, aspects and ideas of tourism and geography experts are acquired. Then weight of each criterion is calculated on the basis of pair-wise comparison (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Weights of criteria

Criteria	Weight
Number of Tourists	0.354
Length of Stay	0.303
Second Visit	0.116
Encouraging the Others	0.227

### 2.6.1. Finding the Importance of Each Factor in Health Tourism

In this phase degree of importance of each factor in health tourism is calculated on the basis of number of health tourists, length of stay, second visit and encouraging others. Weights are given by technical managers of tourism companies in Iran. Degrees are assigned a number between 0 (not important) & 1 (most important). Then by application of TOPSIS technique and considering the weight of each of the determined criteria degree of importance of each factor is calculated (Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 2:** Table of importance of external factors

Opportunities	Number of tourists	Length of stay	Repetition of visit	Encouraging the others
1. Ever developing demand for health tourism across the world, especially in countries with old population.	7.08	7.54	7.03	7.09
2. High cost of health services in some countries, especially in western countries.	7.85	8.06	7.51	7.29
3. Existence of demand by neighbor and central Asia countries, which have weak health system in comparison to Iran; like newly independent states in Central Asia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.	9.77	9.86	9.43	9.93
4. Existence of high volume of potential tourists, like Iranians settled in western, neighbor or Islamic countries, which have historical, religious or cultural relations with Iran.	9.71	9.87	9.46	9.27
5. Geographical position of this country and closeness to health tourist generating countries.	8.76	8.48	7.66	7.37
6. Accessibility by ship, airplane, train and car.	9.17	9.12	8.82	8.61
7. High level of technological development of health and diagnostic systems.	9.79	9.84	9.26	9.15
8. Existence of the supplementary attractions.	7.25	7.69	6.93	7.14

**Table 2:** Table of importance of external factors - continued

Threats	Number of tourists	Length of stay	Repetition of visit	Encouraging the others
1. Presentation of an unsuitable image of Iran in International societies (negative advertisement and political and economic prohibitions) to international tourists.	7.69	7.78	7.55	7.41
2. Tensions, restlessness and insecurity in Middle East and especially in neighbor countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, which causes the number of international tourists to decrease.	5.59	5.38	5.47	5.29
3. Increase and intensification of competing in international markets and existence of capable competitors in health tourism, such as India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and China and the threat of existence of potential rivals, such as Turkey.	8.74	8.68	8.59	8.33
4. World economic recession which causes the number of travelers to be decreased.	7.46	7.08	6.71	6.69
5. Natural disasters like floods and earthquake.	4.75	4.81	4.66	4.34
6. Not choosing Iran by health tourists from western and developed countries.	9.94	9.98	9.97	9.91

**Table 3:** Table of importance of internal factors

Strengths	Number of tourists	Length of stay	Repetition of visit	Encouraging the others
1. Low costs and acceptable quality of health services in Iran, in comparison to neighbor countries.	9.46	9.37	9.39	9.77
2. Notable and famous Iranian doctors who are trained in developed countries.	8.13	8.02	7.79	8.19
3. Existence of new methods and possibility of treatment of some diseases like infertility; plastic surgery and implanting which are not possible in neighbor countries.	8.37	8.86	8.50	8.76
4. Developed pharmaceutical companies, in comparison with neighbor countries.	7.68	7.49	6.37	7.18
5. Lots of therapeutic hot and cold springs.	7.76	7.82	6.59	7.59
6. Long history of traditional and supplementary medicine.	9.59	9.08	9.43	9.62
7. Richness and variety of native herbs which have unique remedial effect, because of especial geographical position of this country.	8.24	8.15	8.02	8.47
8. Lack of seasonality in Iran health tourism.	8.69	9.03	8.77	8.84
Weaknesses	Number of tourists	Length of stay	Repetition of visit	Encouraging the others
1. Lack of comprehensive plans and strategies to develop health tourism and existence of public and legal restrictions and over incumbering the government in the field of health, medicine and tourism.	9.88	9.79	9.84	8.96
2. Unsuitable transportation system for easy access to remote and thermal springs.	6.63	6.83	6.47	6.39
3. Lack or weakness of hospitality and accommodation centers to provide good services to health tourists.	8.71	8.89	8.63	8.59
4. Inexpert, weak and inefficient human resource and lack of suitable educational system, especially in the field of health tourism.	9.47	9.67	9.74	9.83
5. Weak promotion and marketing efforts to introduce health tourism strengths and potentials.	9.74	9.66	9.81	9.92

**Table 3:** Table of importance of internal factors - continued

6. Low access to modern technologies in health services.	9.12	9.16	9.09	0.27
7. Unsuitable infrastructures such as hospitals and not enough medical equipment to provide services to ambitious health tourists	9.39	9.52	9.63	9.76
8. Problems related to contact with famous doctors.	8.44	8.31	8.08	7.95
9. Limited activity of travel agencies in the field of health tourism and in the vicinity of the areas which have good weather.	8.64	8.94	8.98	8.77
10. Weakness of social security, especially in remote areas.	6.62	6.79	6.70	6.77
11. High rate of inflation and unsuitable domestic economy which hardens the development of health tourism and increases the expense of travel to Iran.	8.76	9.05	8.94	9.02
12. Cultural and communicative barriers, especially in the vicinity of therapeutic springs and negative attitude of government authorities, policy makers and local communities to development of tourism.	6.89	7.07	6.78	6.96

### 2.6.2. Finding Final Scores of External Factors (EFE)

In order to calculate the final score of external factors, we put the opportunities and threat factors for health tourism in EFE matrix. Then degree of importance of each of the factors which was previously calculated via TOPSIS technique were added and each of the degrees of importance was divided to total degree and the result is entered in the column of coefficients of EFE. This helps us to gain the total coefficient equal to one. In the next step we found the ranks of each external factor. The degree of importance (weight) of each factor was multiplied in its rank to find the total score of each factor. After that, the scores of all factors in the matrix were added to find the total final score of external factors (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Matrix of external factors in health tourism

	External Factors	Degree of importance	Rank	Final score
<b>Opportunities</b>	1. Ever developing demand for health tourism across the world.	0.0494	3.67	0.1813
	2. High cost of health services in some countries, especially in western countries.	0.0637	3.38	0.2153
	3. Existence of demand by tourists from neighbor and central Asia countries, which have weak health system in comparison to Iran.	0.1162	3.86	0.4485
	4. Existence of high volume of potential tourists like Iranians settled in western, neighbor or Islamic countries, which have historical, religious or cultural relations with Iran.	0.1116	3.88	0.4330
	5. Geographical position of this country and closeness to health tourist generating countries.	0.0770	3.72	0.2864
	6. Accessibility by ship, airplane, train and car	0.0959	3.67	0.3520
	7. High level of technological development in the world, which can support tourism industry	0.1104	3.69	0.4074
	8. Existence of the supplementary attractions, beside health tourism attractions.	0.0526	3.82	0.2009
<b>Threats</b>	1. Presentation of an unsuitable image of Iran in International societies (negative advertisement and political and economic prohibitions) to international tourists.	0.0605	1.87	0.1131

**Table 4:** Matrix of external factors in health tourism - continued

<b>Threats</b>	2. Tensions, restlessness and insecurity in Middle East and especially in neighbor countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, which causes the number of international tourists to decrease.	0.0050	1.84	0.0092
	3. Increase and intensification of competing in international markets and existence of capable competitors in health tourism, such as India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and China and the threat of existence of potential rivals, such as Turkey.	0.0859	1.92	0.1649
	4. World economic recession which causes the number of travelers to be decreased.	0.0469	1.79	0.0840
	5. Natural disasters like floods and earthquake.	0.0043	1.88	0.0081
	6. Not choosing Iran by health tourists from western and developed countries.	0.1206	1.15	0.1387
<b>Total</b>		10		3.0428

### 2.6.3. Analysis of the Results of the Table of External Factors of Health Tourism Matrix

Surveying the results of the matrix of the external factors of Iran health tourism shows that this industry faces 8 opportunities and 6 threats, among which factor number 3 (Existence of demand by tourists from neighbor and central Asia countries) with degree of importance equal to 0.1162 and factor number 4 (Existence of high volume of potential tourists) with degree of importance equal to 0.1116 are the most important opportunities for Iran health tourism. Also the ranks show that this industry is showing a good reaction to all the opportunities and is in suitable situation.

The results of the table of threats of Iran health tourism shows that factor number 6 (Not choosing Iran by health tourists from western and developed countries) with degree of importance equal to 0.1206 and ranked 1.15 is the most important threat which this industry is facing and is not showing a good reaction to it. Other ranks indicate good reaction to the related factors. Getting final score equal to 3.0428 for the matrix of external factors of Iran health tourism is in good status and condition of the industry in exploiting the opportunities and overcoming the threats.

### 2.6.4. Calculating Final Score of Internal Factors (IFE Matrix)

To calculate final score of internal factors, the factors which caused strength and weakness were put in internal factors matrix. Then the degree of importance of each factor which was previously calculated by applying TOPSIS technique were added and then each of the degrees was divided to it and the result was entered in the column of coefficients of IFE matrix.

This helps us to gain the total coefficient equal to one. In the next step the rank of each of the internal factors was calculated. Then the degree of importance (weight) of each factor was multiplied in its rank to find the total score of each factor. After that, the scores of all factors in the matrix were added to find the total final score of external factors (Table 5).

**Table 5:** Matrix of internal factors in health tourism

	<b>Internal Factors</b>	<b>Degree of importance</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Final score</b>
<b>Strengths</b>	1. Low cost and acceptable quality of health services in Iran in comparison to neighbor countries.	0.0635	3.85	0.2445
	2. Notable and famous Iranian doctors who are trained in developed countries.	0.0463	3.54	0.1639
	3. Existence of new methods and possibility of treatment of some diseases like infertility; plastic surgery and implanting which are not possible in neighbor countries.	0.0522	3.69	0.1926

**Table 5:** Matrix of internal factors in health tourism - continued

<b>Strengths</b>	4. Developed pharmaceutical companies, in comparison with neighbor countries.	0.0387	3.74	0.1447
	5. Lots of therapeutic hot and cold springs.	0.0415	3.39	0.1407
	6. Long history of traditional and supplementary medicine.	0.0624	3.18	0.1984
	7. Richness and variety of native herbs which have unique remedial effect, because of especial geographical position of this country.	0.0483	2.76	0.1333
	8. Lack of seasonality in Iran health tourism.	0.0550	3.86	0.2123
<b>Weaknesses</b>	1. Lack of comprehensive plans and strategies to develop health tourism and existence of public and legal restrictions and over incumbent of the government in the field of health, medicine and tourism.	0.0630	1.56	0.0983
	2. Unsuitable transportation system for easy access to remote and thermal springs.	0.0311	1.82	0.0566
	3. Lack or weakness of hospitality and accommodation centers to provide good services to health tourists.	0.0538	1.55	0.0834
	4. Inexpert, weak and inefficient human resource and lack of suitable educational system, especially in the field of health tourism.	0.0648	1.26	0.0816
	5. Weak promotion and marketing efforts to introduce health tourism strengths and potentials.	0.0670	1.36	0.0911
	6. Low access to modern technologies in health services.	0.0233	1.86	0.0433
	7. Unsuitable infrastructures such as hospitals and not enough medical equipment to provide services to ambitious health tourists	0.0637	1.29	0.0822
	8. Problems related to contact with famous doctors.	0.0480	1.53	0.0734
	9. Limited activity of travel agencies in the field of health tourism and in the vicinity of the areas which have good weather.	0.0544	1.48	0.0805
	10. Weakness of social security, especially in remote areas.	0.0324	1.89	0.0612
	11. High rate of inflation and unsuitable domestic economy which makes the development of health tourism difficult and increases the expense of travel to Iran.	0.0561	1.77	0.0993
	12. Cultural and communicative barriers, especially in the vicinity of therapeutic springs and negative attitude of government authorities, policy makers and local communities to development of tourism.	0.0345	1.83	0.0631
<b>Total</b>		<b>1</b>		<b>2.3444</b>

### 2.6.5. Analysis of the Results of the Table of the Internal Factors of Health Tourism Matrix

Surveying the results of the internal factors of Iran health tourism industry matrix shows that this industry is facing 8 strengths and 12 weaknesses, among which factor number 1 (Low cost and acceptable quality of health services) with degree of importance equal to 0.0635 is the most important strength; also we can say that this industry is showing a good reaction to all the strengths and has well exploited them.

The most important weakness of Iran health tourism are factor number 5 (Weak promotion and marketing efforts) with degree of importance equal to 0.0670 and factor number 4 (Inexpert, weak and inefficient human resource) with degree of importance equal to 0.0648. The acquired ranks indicate average and sometimes good reaction of this industry to the weaknesses. In general, total score equal to 2.3444 shows average status of Iran health tourism industry in taking advantage of the strengths and eliminating the weaknesses. (Table 6)

### 2.6.6. Comparing Data and Preparing Initial Strategies by Applying SWOT Matrix

In the matrix of preparing strategies, evaluation stage includes all instruments which are dependent on all acquired data from previous stages (evaluation of internal and external factors) and it compares

external opportunities and threats with internal strengths and weaknesses. For this, internal and external factors in SWOT matrix are compared to prepare possible strategies.

In the next step recognized opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses of health tourism industry of Iran were put in columns of the matrix. Then internal strengths and external opportunities, internal weaknesses and external threats are compared and the results are entered in the places related to SO (strengths-opportunities), WO (weaknesses-opportunities), ST (strengths-threats) and WT (weaknesses-threats) strategies.

## **2.6.7. Strategies of Iran Health Tourism Industry on the Basis of SWOT Matrix**

### **2.6.7.1. SO Strategies**

1. Penetration in the markets of the countries located in the region, such as newly independent states of Central Asia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
2. Developing new geographical markets especially health tourist generating markets.
3. Developing health tourism product by emphasizing on health tourism attractions, through improving the products and services.
4. Focusing on the target markets which rivals have a small share of them.

### **2.6.7.2. ST Strategies**

1. Establishing health tourism complexes in suitable regions.
2. Diversifying health tourism products (providing varied health tourism products in a package to health tourists).
3. Providing distinguished and especial health tourism products for health tourists, so that these kinds of products cannot be provided in rival countries especially in India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, China and Turkey.
4. Providing other tourism products like leisure tourism, cultural or urban tourism to health tourists.
5. Providing comprehensive packages to health tourists.
6. Renovating and developing health tourism regions.

### **2.6.7.3. WO Strategies**

1. Balanced or sustainable development of Iran health tourism in areas with good and suitable weather and therapeutic spas through preparing and approving supporting plans and enhancing the security for health tourists.
2. Decreasing the responsibilities of the government in health and treatment sectors.
3. Decreasing expenses and providing cheap health tourism packages.
4. Attracting health tourists all year round.
5. Transfer the services related to health tourism to qualified domestic and foreign companies in order to improve the quality and decrease the prices.
6. Adapting and utilizing new technologies to provide support for Iran health tourism.
7. Inclusion of other tourism products in health tourism packages and establishing complementary attractions beside health tourism attractions.
8. Reforming the plans and preparing comprehensive strategies to develop health tourism in Iran.

### **2.6.7.4. WT Strategies**

1. Developing global cooperation in technical and technological issues and research and development projects with research institutes and experiences global universities.
2. Participating with leading countries in the field of health tourism to execute big projects and attracting foreign investors to provide financial support to these projects.
3. Investing in the areas with good weather and hot and cold springs by allocating state fund, attracting public participation and demanding loans from international financial institutions.

4. Improving the image of Iran in the world, through suitable diplomacy, advertisement, establishing health tourism developing offices in Iran embassies, located in different countries and etc.
5. Marketing and introducing health tourism attractions of Iran.
6. Participating with Turkey in order to arrange joint package tours in the field of health tourism.
7. Invest to improve the quality of infrastructures, such as road transport systems, hospitality and accommodation centers, medical and health services, increasing access to new technologies, such as Internet, telephone, post, guiding software and so on in regions with good weather and hot and cold springs.
8. Reinforcing local societies, through education and management of health tourism attractions and suitable relationship with health tourists.

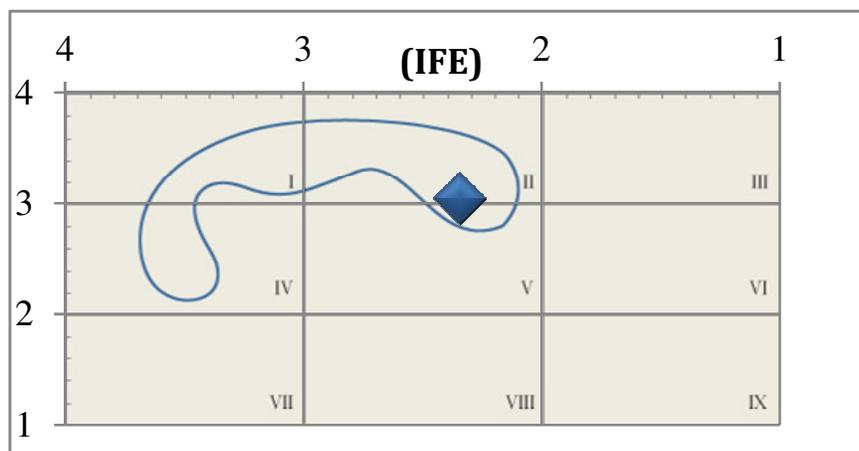
#### 2.6.8. Determining the Position and Selecting Acceptable Strategies by Applying IE Matrix

After preparing initial strategies by comparing internal and external factors in the matrix of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) acceptable strategies were selected among them. The process of selecting acceptable strategies of Iran health tourism industry is as follows:

Preparing internal and external matrix (IE) includes two main dimensions. Final scores of matrix of evaluation of internal factors are shown on X axis and sum of final scores of matrix of evaluation of external factors of Iran health tourism industry is shown on Y axis. The incidence point of sum of scores of internal and external factors of Iran health tourism on X and Y determines the status of Iran health tourism industry in internal and external matrix (Diagram 2).

Considering the matter that the joining point of total score of internal and external factors of Iran health tourism is placed in cell 2 of internal and external matrix (IE) and this industry is enjoying lots of strengths and opportunities and suitable status in exploiting them and good reaction to threats and weaknesses, grow and build (aggressive) strategies are suggested. As the second priority ST and Then WO strategies can be effective.

**Diagram 2:** Internal and External Matrix of Iran Health tourism (IE)



#### 2.6.9. Choosing Acceptable Strategies

Acceptable strategies of Iran health tourism industry with attention to its place in cell 2 of internal and external matrix (IE) are known as grow and build (aggressive) strategies. Considering a lot of strengths of this industry and its external opportunities, ST and WO strategies are in the next priority.

**Table 6:** Final strategies for Iran Health tourism

No	Final Strategies in Health Tourism	Total attractiveness Score
1	Penetration in the markets of the countries in the region, such as newly independent states of Central Asia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.	3.91
2	Developing health tourism product by emphasizing on health tourism attractions, through improving the products and services.	3.83
3	Developing new geographical markets especially health tourist generating markets.	3.48
4	Providing distinguished and especial health tourism products for health tourists, so that these kinds of products cannot be provided in rival countries especially in India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, China and Turkey.	3.11
5	Diversifying health tourism products (providing varied health tourism products in a package to health tourists).	2.84
6	Providing other tourism products like leisure tourism, cultural or urban tourism to health tourists.	2.13
7	Renovating and developing health tourism regions.	1.89

### 3. Discussion and Conclusion

High cost of treatment in most of the countries in the region, low level of quality and weak health system in those countries has increased the demand for health and treatment system of Iran. In addition, as a health tourism destination and because of closeness to health tourist generating markets, Iran has especial geographical position and access to it is relatively easy.

Beside this, we can point to suitable and low prices, acceptable quality of health and treatment systems and existence of new diagnostic and treatment techniques and developed pharmaceutical companies as other important factors in attracting health tourists to Iran.

Results show that, besides enjoying lots of possibilities for development, Iran health tourism is facing with some problems, which if not solved, will result in recession of this industry in front of strong rivals and abandoning the market share in favor of them.

Most of the problems are because of the lack of strategic planning and public limitations and over incumbent of the government in the field of treatment, medicine and health; also unsuitable accommodation centers, low access to new technologies in medicine and health care, unsuitable infrastructures like hospitals and not introducing Iran health tourism attractions are basic weaknesses of this industry.

In general we can say that health tourism has more suitable situation in comparison to other forms of tourism in Iran and grow and build (aggressive) strategies are suitable for it.

Increasing the market share in the markets of neighbor countries and other countries in the region, improving health tourism products and services, penetrating in new markets, providing especial and distinguished products to health tourists and diversification of tourism products are basic solutions to develop this industry in Iran.

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