



Strategies to Increase Health Tourism Attraction from Iraq with Emphasis on Financial Investment and Smart Marketing in Ilam Province

Nabi Omidi¹, Ayoub Menati², Mohsen Emami³, Mohammad Reza Omidi^{4*}

¹Department of Management, Payame Noor University; Tehran; Iran

²Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Ilam University, Ilam, Iran

³Technology Management, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

⁴Department of Industrial Engineering, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

Introduction: Medical tourism in Ilam Province has significant potential but remains underutilized, particularly among Iraqi patients. This study examines effective strategies for developing medical tourism, focusing on financial investment and smart marketing to enhance competitiveness.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was applied. The qualitative phase used thematic analysis via MAXQDA 2020, analyzing semi-structured interviews with 18 experts (6 hospital managers, 5 university professors, and 7 private sector professionals' data were collected in 2025). The screening phase involved 12 specialists (4 senior executives, 5 academic researchers, and 3 marketing consultants). The quantitative phase collected 128 questionnaires from employees of Ilam's Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, analyzed using SPSS 21.

Results: In the qualitative phase, a total of 38 strategies were identified within two main subthemes—19 strategies related to financial investment attraction and 19 to smart marketing—which were confirmed by expert consensus through the fuzzy Delphi method. In the quantitative phase, using Friedman's test, financial strategies received a higher average ranking (mean rank: 18.65) compared to marketing strategies (12.39). The top-ranked items overall included the health economic zone, five-year tax exemptions, and a loan guarantee fund.

Conclusion: Advancing medical tourism in Ilam requires the simultaneous prioritization of financial incentives (such as special economic zones and tax exemptions) and innovative digital marketing. Streamlining investment procedures, developing multilingual digital platforms, and strengthening public-private partnerships are essential steps to increase foreign patient attraction. These integrated strategies will help position Ilam as a competitive destination in the regional health tourism market.

Keywords: Medical tourism, Financial investment, Smart marketing

● **Article History:**
Received: 2 July 2025
Accepted: 22 August 2025

● **Please cite this paper as:**
Omidi N, Menati A, Emami M, Omidi MR. Strategies to Increase Health Tourism Attraction from Iraq with Emphasis on Financial Investment and Smart Marketing in Ilam Province. *Health Man & Info Sci.* 2025; 12(4): 258-266. doi: 10.30476/jhmi.2025.107526.1290.

● ***Correspondence to:**
Mohammad Reza Omidi,
Department of Industrial
Engineering, Payame Noor
University, Tehran, Iran
Email: mromidi_91@yahoo.com

Introduction

Medical tourism, as one of the most dynamic sectors of the global tourism industry, plays an unparalleled role in economic development and the enhancement of healthcare infrastructure in countries (1). This industry, which combines specialized medical services with tourism facilities, particularly in border regions with cost-efficiency competitive advantages, can become a driving force for regional development (2). Ilam Province, with its shared border with Iraq, easy access to the Iraqi consumer market, and advanced medical centers, has the potential

to become a hub for medical tourism in western Iran (3). However, despite significant capacities, Iran's share of the multibillion-dollar regional medical tourism market remains minimal (4). Official statistics indicate that over 1.2 million Iraqi citizens travel abroad annually for medical purposes, making Iraq one of the largest sources of outbound medical tourists in the region (5). However, Iran's share of this market remains limited. According to the Iranian Ministry of Health, approximately 150,000 Iraqi patients received treatment in Iran in 2023, with less than 5% choosing Ilam Province as their destination

(4). In contrast, neighboring destinations such as Turkey and India attract a significantly higher percentage of Iraqi medical tourists. These figures highlight both the considerable potential and the current underutilization of Ilam's capacity in this lucrative regional market.

One of the fundamental requirements for the growth of medical tourism is robust financial investment (6, 7). Adequate capital enables upgrades in infrastructure, recruitment of skilled professionals, and provision of high-quality international service (8). Both public and private sectors play a role in these investments, utilizing mechanisms such as tax incentives, preferential bank loans, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) to attract capita (9). Moreover, by establishing transparent legal frameworks and guaranteeing returns, it is possible to appeal to foreign investors, which is crucial for sustainable industry development (10). In parallel, the evolution of digital communication has elevated smart marketing as another decisive factor for attracting medical tourists (11). Employing tools like search engine optimization (SEO), targeted social media campaigns, and specialized content platforms expands international reach, while big data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) empower providers to personalize marketing based on patient behavior and preferences (12). Building a strong online brand and providing transparent information about services, costs, and treatment quality are other crucial components of smart marketing in medical tourism (13).

Despite these potentials, a substantial portion of Iraqi citizens seeking medical services continues to travel to neighboring countries other than Iran (14). This is while Ilam Province, with its numerous comparative advantages, including cost-effective medical services, cultural and linguistic similarities with Iraqi border provinces, and developing medical infrastructure, could capture a significant portion of this market. Field studies conducted in Ilam's medical centers reveal that most Iraqi patients visiting the province have learned about the quality of services through informal networks and word-of-mouth, which highlights a systemic weakness in digital branding and targeted marketing efforts (10).

Numerous obstacles hinder the development of medical tourism in Ilam Province, including a lack of private sector investment, the absence of a unified legal framework to facilitate patient

entry, financial constraints on local medical centers in upgrading equipment, and a shortage of multilingual specialists. These challenges have reduced the province's competitiveness compared to other destinations such as Turkey (15). Moreover, the lack of smart marketing strategies and the failure to leverage digital marketing potentials have squandered valuable opportunities to attract Iraqi patients.

Digital marketing tools—such as multilingual healthcare websites, search engine optimization (SEO), targeted social media campaigns, and collaborations with medical influencers—play a pivotal role in attracting international patients (16). For instance, Turkey's use of Arabic-language Instagram pages and dedicated WhatsApp consultation lines has dramatically increased Iraqi patient inflows, while the UAE's government-backed health tourism portal enables seamless service comparison and online bookings for foreign patients (15, 17). Compared to these regional leaders, Ilam's current approach, which mainly relies on informal referrals and lacks a coordinated digital presence, highlights a significant opportunity for improvement through structured, localized, and technology-driven marketing strategies.

This research, relying on a combined theoretical framework that includes the theory of foreign direct investment in medical tourism and the smart marketing model, examines strategies for developing this industry in Ilam Province. The primary objective of the study is to identify the most effective strategies for attracting medical tourists from Iraq, with a focus on investment attraction and smart marketing. The findings of this research can serve as a roadmap for provincial policymakers in designing tax incentives, for medical centers in creating combined treatment-tourism packages, and for marketing institutions in utilizing digital platforms.

Methods

This study was conducted using a mixed-method (qualitative-quantitative) approach with a descriptive-analytical design. In the qualitative phase, 18 experts—including hospital administrators, university professors, and private sector professionals—were selected through purposive sampling based on the principle of theoretical saturation, ensuring that sampling continued until no new themes emerged. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews,

conducted either in person or online according to participants' availability, with each session lasting 35 to 50 minutes, being audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was performed in three successive stages: open, axial, and selective coding. Subsequently, the identified factors were screened and finalized via three rounds of fuzzy Delphi with 12 specialists, selected according to methodological recommendations for expert panel size. The fuzzy Delphi process involved three rounds: in each round, experts rated each proposed strategy using triangular fuzzy numbers on a scale of 1–10. Consensus criteria for retaining strategies included a triangular fuzzy average ≥ 7.5 , standard deviation ≤ 1.5 , and an inconsistency rate $\leq 20\%$. Strategies not meeting these criteria were eliminated. The panel consisted of 4 senior executives, 5 academic researchers, and 3 marketing consultants, reflecting diverse perspectives on health tourism.

In the quantitative phase, the statistical population comprised 210 employees of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization of Ilam Province. The sample size of 136 individuals was determined using Cochran's formula (5% margin of error, 95% confidence level) and selected through stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation of different organizational roles. *Inclusion criteria consisted of having at least two years of work experience in the organization, direct involvement in tourism-related activities, willingness to participate, and the ability to complete the questionnaire.* Quantitative data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire based on the findings of the qualitative and Delphi phases. The instrument included 38 items covering both financial investment and smart marketing strategies, rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very low" to "very high." Content validity was confirmed by a panel of experts (CVR=0.82), and internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=0.89$). Data analysis was conducted with SPSS version 26, employing descriptive statistics, the Friedman non-parametric test for ranking strategies, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess relationships between variables. Model fit indices (e.g., CFI ≥ 0.90 , RMSEA ≤ 0.08 , SRMR < 0.08 , χ^2/df ratio) were interpreted according to established standards. In addition, Kendall's coefficient

of concordance (Kendall's W) was calculated to evaluate the level of consensus among respondents, with values closer to 1 indicating stronger agreement on strategy rankings.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, maintaining data confidentiality, and allowing participants to withdraw from the study at any stage. For integration, qualitative themes and quantitative rankings were compared and contrasted through a triangulation approach, with meta-inference developed by interpreting the overall findings in light of both strands. This integration ensured that prioritized strategies were robust both empirically and contextually. This methodology, by integrating qualitative and quantitative findings, provides a comprehensive framework for prioritizing health tourism development strategies.

Results

Demographic information for participants in each phase of the study is summarized in Table 1. In the qualitative phase (thematic analysis), 18 experts participated, including 6 medical center managers, 5 university professors, and 7 private sector activists, with an average age of 42.3 years and 12.7 years of work experience; 55.5% were male and 44.5% were female. As shown in Table 1, most participants in this phase held a PhD (77.8%) and the rest had a master's degree (22.2%), with places of service in medical centers, universities, and private companies. The screening (Delphi) phase included 12 specialists (4 senior organizational managers, 5 academic researchers, and 3 marketing consultants), with an average age of 45.8 years and 15.2 years of specialized experience, of whom 58.3% were male and 41.7% were female. According to Table 1, 75% of this group held a PhD and 25% a master's degree, mainly working in governmental organizations and research centers. In the quantitative phase, 128 completed questionnaires were analyzed out of 136 distributed among staff of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization of Ilam Province (response rate 94.1%). As detailed in Table 1, this group included 74 males (57.8%) and 54 females (42.2%), with an average age of 37.5 years and 9.8 years of work experience; educationally, 62.5% held a bachelor's degree and 37.5% a master's degree, and their roles comprised senior experts, experts, and technicians, all serving within the province's cultural heritage offices.

Table 1: Comprehensive Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Feature	Qualitative Phase (n=18)	Screening Phase (n=12)	Quantitative Phase (n=128)
Gender	10 male (55.5%)	7 male (58.3%)	74 male (57.8%)
	8 female (44.5%)	5 female (41.7%)	54 female (42.2%)
Average Age	42.3 years (SD: 6.2)	45.8 years (SD: 7.1)	37.5 years (SD: 8.3)
Work Experience	12.7 years (SD: 4.5)	15.2 years (SD: 5.8)	9.8 years (SD: 3.6)
Education	14 PhD (77.8%)	9 PhD (75%)	48 Master's (37.5%)
	4 Master's (22.2%)	3 Master's (25%)	80 Bachelor's (62.5%)
Organizational Position	6 Medical Center Managers	4 Senior Managers	28 Senior Experts
	5 University Professors	5 Researchers	72 Experts
	7 Private Activists	3 Marketing Consultants	28 Technicians
Place of Service	10 Medical Centers	6 Governmental Organizations	128 Ilam Province Cultural Heritage Organizations
	5 Universities	6 Research Centers	
	3 Private Companies		

Table 2: Strategies Extracted in Thematic Analysis

No.	Strategy	Brief Description
Financial Investment Strategies		
1	Establish Special Health Economic Zone	Allocate land and special facilities for investors
2	5-Year Tax Exemption	Full income tax exemption for new investors
3	Establish Loan Guarantee Fund	Government guarantee of bank loans up to 80%
4	Attract Persian Gulf Investors	Focus on Emirati and Omani investors
5	Public-Private Partnership (PPP)	Partnership models in medical center construction
6	Foreign Investment Insurance	Investment guarantee by Investment Organization
7	Hold Investment Events	Specialized exhibitions for capital attraction
8	Create Health Startup Accelerators	Support innovative health ideas
9	Facilitate Licensing	Reduce licensing time to <15 days
10	Support Hospital Hotels	Provide low-interest facilities for development
11	Establish International Financial Centers	Launch branches of foreign banks
12	Develop Health Service Exports	Export incentives for medical centers
13	Attract Endowment Investments	Develop health-oriented endowments
14	Create Health Stock Market	List shares of medical centers on stock exchange
15	Joint Foreign Investment	Partnership with Turkish and Indian companies
16	Develop Research Centers	Attract capital for applied research
17	International Health Insurance	Insurance coverage for foreign patients
18	Create Medical Cities	Develop integrated medical-recreational spaces
19	Attract Digital Capital	Finance e-health platforms
Smart Marketing Strategies		
20	Design Multilingual App	Online reservation system in Arabic and Kurdish
21	Targeted Digital Campaigns	Ads on popular platforms among Iraqis
22	Search Engine Optimization	SEO for health keywords in Arabic
23	Use of Influencers	Collaborate with Iraqi doctors/celebrities
24	Launch Virtual Tours	360° display of medical centers
25	Create Telegram Channels	Provide medical consultation in Arabic
26	Border Environmental Advertising	Attractive billboards at Mehran border
27	Partnership with Iraqi Hotels	Combined treatment-accommodation packages
28	Produce Video Content	Documentaries of successful Iraqi patient treatments
29	Integrated Reservation System	Connect all centers to central system
30	Loyalty Program	Reward points for regular patients
31	Collaborate with Iraqi Media	Interviews on Iraqi TV networks
32	Hold Medical Webinars	With Iranian/Iraqi doctors
33	Launch Multilingual Hotline	24/7 Arabic support
34	Airport Advertising	Attractive banners at Najaf/Baghdad airports
35	Use Augmented Reality	Display cosmetic surgery results
36	Medical Referral System	Rewards for referring physicians
38	Attend Iraqi Exhibitions	Active booths in medical exhibitions

In the thematic analysis phase, qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach was used. During this phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 health tourism experts (including medical center managers, university professors, and private sector activists). After transcription, data were analyzed in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. In open coding, 215 initial codes were extracted the codes were derived line-by-line from the interview transcripts by two independent coders using MAXQDA 2020, and coding discrepancies were resolved through consensus meetings, which after merging similar items and removing duplicates, were reduced to 120 conceptual codes. In axial and selective coding, systematic relationships between themes and categories were examined through constant comparative analysis and repeated cross-checking of codes, the main categories and conceptual linkages were established by grouping related codes into themes and subthemes based on both their semantic proximity and expert feedback, and 38 key strategies were extracted under two main axes: financial investment attraction (19 strategies) and smart marketing (19 strategies). This process was performed using MAXQDA 2020 software, adhering to credibility criteria including participant review and inter-coder agreement inter-coder reliability was checked, and participants were asked to validate selected themes through member checking; for example, one participant stated, “The lack of targeted investment has left most hospitals with outdated equipment and limited capacity to serve foreign patients,” highlighting the importance of financial strategies in theme extraction. The extracted themes and strategies are presented in Table 2.

The fuzzy Delphi screening process was

conducted in three rounds with 12 experts that is, the Delphi method was repeated three times to achieve consensus and stability of results among experts, applying elimination criteria including a triangular fuzzy mean score below 7.5 indicating no consensus on effectiveness, a standard deviation above 1.5 reflecting high expert disagreement, and an inconsistency coefficient exceeding 20% demonstrating non-alignment with Ilam Province goals, with the eliminated strategies detailed in Table 3.

The Friedman test with 128 staff of Ilam’s Cultural Heritage Organization showed significant differences among strategies ($P < 0.001$), while Kendall’s W (0.786) indicated high consensus in prioritization. The results highlight the greater importance of financial strategies (mean rank: 18.65) over marketing strategies (12.39), confirming that financial infrastructure, investment facilities, and support mechanisms are key for health tourism growth, with the top strategies being the Special Health Economic Zone, 5-Year Tax Exemption, and Loan Guarantee Fund. Simultaneously, smart marketing strategies such as multilingual apps, targeted digital campaigns, and influencer collaborations were identified as effective for attracting Iraqi patients (Table 4).

Discussion

This research demonstrated that health tourism in Ilam Province has significant potential for development, yet there are numerous obstacles in realizing this potential. The findings revealed that despite its favorable geographical location, proximity to Iraq, and the presence of medical centers, Ilam Province has not yet secured a desirable share of Iraq’s health tourism market.

Table 3: Strategies Eliminated Using Fuzzy Delphi Method

No.	Strategy	Fuzzy Mean	SD	Inconsistency %	Elimination Reason
6	Foreign Investment Insurance	6.8	1.72	25%	Operational infeasibility
11	Int’l Financial Centers	7.1	1.63	28%	Legal restrictions
13	Attract Endowment Investments	6.2	1.85	31%	Low investor appeal
14	Health Stock Market	6.9	1.58	27%	Implementation complexity
18	Create Medical Cities	7.0	1.67	24%	High capital requirement
25	Telegram Channels	6.5	1.91	33%	Limited access in Iraq
28	Produce Video Content	7.2	1.54	22%	High cost
30	Loyalty Program	6.7	1.78	29%	Cultural incompatibility
32	Hold Medical Webinars	7.3	1.62	23%	Limited effectiveness
34	Airport Advertising	6.4	1.87	32%	Cost/benefit imbalance
35	Use Augmented Reality	5.9	2.05	37%	Technological unpreparedness
36	Medical Referral System	7.0	1.59	26%	Financial violation risks

Table 4: Ranking of Health Tourism Attraction Strategies

Rank	Strategy	Mean Rank	SD	Kendall's W	P value
1	Special Health Economic Zone	20.4	3.2	0.786	<0.001
2	5-Year Tax Exemption	19.8	2.9	0.786	<0.001
3	Loan Guarantee Fund	19.2	3.0	0.786	<0.001
4	Attract Persian Gulf Investors	18.9	3.1	0.786	<0.001
5	Public-Private Partnership (PPP)	18.5	2.8	0.786	<0.001
6	Hold Investment Events	18.3	3.2	0.786	<0.001
7	Develop Health Service Exports	17.9	3.1	0.786	<0.001
8	Facilitate Licensing	17.5	2.7	0.786	<0.001
9	Support Hospital Hotels	17.2	3.0	0.786	<0.001
10	Joint Foreign Investment	16.9	3.3	0.786	<0.001
11	Develop Research Centers	16.4	2.9	0.786	<0.001
12	Design Multilingual App	15.8	3.1	0.786	<0.001
13	Targeted Digital Campaigns	15.4	2.8	0.786	<0.001
14	Use of Influencers	15.0	2.7	0.786	<0.001
15	Search Engine Optimization	14.6	2.9	0.786	<0.001
16	Launch Virtual Tours	14.2	3.0	0.786	<0.001
17	Border Environmental Advertising	13.8	3.1	0.786	<0.001
18	Partnership with Iraqi Hotels	13.4	2.7	0.786	<0.001
19	Integrated Reservation System	13.0	2.8	0.786	<0.001
20	Collaborate with Iraqi Media	12.6	3.0	0.786	<0.001
21	Launch Multilingual Hotline	12.2	2.9	0.786	<0.001
22	Exhibit at Iraqi Exhibitions	11.8	2.7	0.786	<0.001

One of the primary reasons for this is the lack of supportive financial policies and digital marketing strategies, which play a key role in attracting foreign patients. The study's findings indicate that combining financial investment and smart marketing as a comprehensive strategy can have a substantial impact on the development of this sector. These findings align with the challenges identified in Iran's border regions. A study by Momeni et al. (2018) on health tourism in East Azerbaijan revealed that weak systematic planning and patient transfer issues are major barriers to development (2). Similarly, Wong et al. (2024) emphasized in their systematic review that the absence of digital marketing strategies has created a significant research gap in medical tourism (18). On the other hand, Çapar and Arslanoğlu's (2025) research proved that achieving sustainable development goals (such as sustainable infrastructure) is a prerequisite for the growth of health tourism (19); the absence of such policies in Ilam is the main reason for the failure to leverage the province's geographical advantage.

An analysis of the collected data in the financial investment ranking phase indicated that economic incentives play a prominent role in increasing health tourism attraction. Among the examined strategies, the three options of

“establishing a special health economic zone,” “five-year tax exemptions,” and “creating a loan guarantee fund” were the most significant. These findings suggest that to attract domestic and foreign investments, an environment must be created where investors can operate in Ilam Province with minimal legal and economic barriers. Simplifying complex licensing processes, providing low-interest facilities, and introducing economic incentives are among the measures that can accelerate capital inflow into this sector. This indicates that while the development of medical services is highly important, without appropriate economic policies, these services cannot compete internationally. The prioritization of financial incentives in this study aligns with global findings. Castilho and Fuinhas (2025) proved in their analysis of EU countries that investment in tourism directly leads to job creation and improved labor rights. Specifically (9), Shahbaz et al. (2025) demonstrated in their fuzzy model that “technological infrastructure” and “financial support” are the two main pillars of sustainable investment; your proposal to establish a “special health economic zone” is a concrete response to this need (12). Additionally, Plzakova (2022) emphasized the necessity of qualitative investment evaluation centered on social criteria (20); the five-year tax exemptions in Ilam can

enhance the social appeal of projects. Conversely, Cao and Du (2024) warned that tourism alone does not guarantee foreign investment (21); this justifies the need for a “loan guarantee fund” as a risk mitigation mechanism in Ilam.

Alongside financial investment, the analysis of results related to smart marketing also revealed that the use of digital tools plays a decisive role in attracting foreign patients. The ranking analysis identified three strategies—“designing a multilingual application,” “targeted digital campaigns,” and “utilizing influencers”—as having the greatest impact on the advertising and branding of Ilam’s health tourism. Foreign patients, particularly Iraqis, often base their medical decisions on information available online. Therefore, digitizing healthcare systems, increasing service transparency, and employing smart marketing methods can enhance Ilam’s share in this market. Additionally, close collaboration with Iraqi media and organizing specialized webinars between Iranian and Iraqi doctors are other measures that can improve Ilam’s position in attracting foreign patients. The necessity of digitization in this study’s findings aligns with post-pandemic developments. Torabi et al. (2023) showed that technological capacity-building in Iran’s rural areas during COVID-19 reduced the digital divide (22); the proposed multilingual application in this study continues this trend. Wong et al. (2024) identified a lack of digital marketing theory application (18); the “targeted campaigns” strategy in this study addresses this gap. Simultaneously, Fauzi et al. (2024) highlighted the role of influencers in the Southeast Asian market (8), supporting this study’s proposed strategy for attracting Iraqi patients. Interestingly, Çapar and Arslanoğlu (2025) proved that “quality education” (SDG 4) drives health tourism (19); this finding reinforces the idea of Iran-Iraq specialized webinars proposed in this study.

Overall, the findings showed that Ilam Province must simultaneously strengthen financial and promotional policies to optimally utilize its health tourism potential. Statistical analyses indicated that financial strategies take precedence over marketing strategies, as without investment and economic incentives, advertising and marketing will not achieve desired effectiveness. The results also emphasize that collaboration between private and public

sectors, public-private partnership (PPP) models, and the development of research centers can create a sustainable and competitive foundation for attracting health tourists. The prioritization of financial infrastructure in this study’s findings aligns with global challenges. Ozdemir et al. (2024) demonstrated that political risk threatens tourism investments (23); the financial incentives proposed in this study counteract this risk in border regions. Law et al. (2022) identified “private-public sector collaboration” as a key criterion in their Community Sensitivity Index (CSI), aligning with your proposed PPP model. Additionally (24), Shahbaz et al. (2025) identified “institutional support” as the third factor in sustainable development (12); this study’s emphasis on research centers reflects this need. However, Hayati et al. (2025) warned that health tourism development increases medical waste (5.17 kg per day per tourist) (25); this highlights the necessity of integrating environmental considerations into Ilam’s sustainable model.

This research also revealed that certain structural barriers hinder the growth of health tourism in Ilam. The absence of unified regulations for patient entry, insufficient foreign investment, and a lack of bilingual human resources were among the key challenges identified. Due to these limitations, Ilam Province has lower competitiveness compared to other medical destinations. Therefore, structural reforms and new policies are needed to create a sustainable and reliable environment for investors and foreign patients.

The study’s results also suggest that for health tourism growth, Ilam Province should prioritize three key actions. First, designing combined treatment-tourism packages that provide a comprehensive experience for foreign patients. Second, streamlining legal and administrative processes for foreign investors and reducing bureaucratic obstacles. Third, organizing specialized investor-attraction events to facilitate direct communication between investors and healthcare stakeholders. Implementing these measures can enhance Ilam’s competitiveness in health tourism and significantly increase its share in the regional market.

A common limitation of this study is its focus on Ilam Province and the perspectives of local stakeholders. Future research is recommended to include comparative studies with other border

provinces or health tourism destinations at the national and international levels, in order to enhance the generalizability and comparability of the findings.

Conclusion

This study shows that the simultaneous development of financial investment infrastructure and smart marketing is key to unlocking Ilam Province's health tourism potential for attracting Iraqi patients. It is recommended that local authorities prioritize designing investment incentive packages—such as five-year tax exemptions and the establishment of a special health economic zone—to attract both domestic and foreign investors. In parallel, launching multilingual digital platforms and targeted advertising campaigns in Iraqi markets should be jointly implemented by the health and tourism sectors. Streamlining administrative procedures and recruiting Arabic-speaking healthcare personnel are also essential to build a more competitive medical tourism ecosystem. Implementing these prioritized strategies will allow Ilam to fully leverage its unique advantages and boost Iran's share in Iraq's promising health tourism market.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the managers and staff of Ilam's medical centers, as well as the experts from the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Ilam Province, for their valuable cooperation in data collection.

Authors' Contribution

N- O: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision.

A-M: Data Analysis, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

M-Omidi: Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft (Corresponding Author).

Ethics Approval

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Payame Noor University with the ethical code IR.PNU.REC.1403.716. All participants were assured of the confidentiality of their information, and informed consent was obtained where necessary.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Wong AKF, Vongvisitsin TB, Li P, Pan Y, Ryan C. Revisiting medical tourism research: Critical reviews and implications for destination management and marketing. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*. 2024;33:100924. doi: 10.1016/j.jdmm.2024.100924.
2. Momeni K, Janati A, Imani A, Khodayari-Zarnaq R. Barriers to the development of medical tourism in East Azerbaijan province, Iran: A qualitative study. *Tourism Management*. 2018;69:307-16. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2018.05.007.
3. Moghaddam P, Franch DB, Ferrer-Roca N. Management self-perception of Iranian women managers in tourism amidst social change. *Tourism Management Perspectives*. 2025;55:101335. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101335.
4. Attarzadeh M. Future studies of the necessity of strengthening the sense of security in choosing Ilam province as a tourist destination. *Journal of Geography and Regional Future Studies*. 2024;2 (3):67-86.
5. Shoara Z, Sadeghifar J, Momeni K, Bazayr M, Khodayari R, Heydari M. Assessment of Readiness Components for Attracting Medical Tourists in the Hospital Industry: A Survey Study in Western Iran. *Health Technology Assessment in Action*. 2025;9 (1).
6. Eberts CE, LaFree A. Complications from bariatric medical tourism: Lessons for the emergency physician from selected case reports. *Am J Emerg Med*. 2025;90:252 e1- e5. doi: 10.1016/j.ajem.2024.11.012.
7. Ozkan O, Popescu IA, Destek MA, Balsalobre-Lorente D. Time-quantile impact of foreign direct investment, financial development, and financial globalisation on green growth in BRICS economies. *J Environ Manage*. 2024;371:123145. doi: 10.1016/j.jenvman.2024.123145.
8. Fauzi MA, Mohd Aripin N, Alimin NSN, Ting IWK, Wider W, Maidin SS, et al. Medical tourism in South East Asia: science mapping of present and future trends. *Asian Education and Development Studies*. 2024;13 (5):393-411. doi: 10.1108/AEDS-04-2024-0093.
9. Castilho D, Fuinhas JA. How do tourism investments affect each pillar of decent

- work? Evidence from European Union countries. *Safety Science*. 2025;189:106896. doi: 10.1016/j.ssci.2025.106896.
10. Gaur S, Kumar R, Gillespie SM, Jump RLP. Integrating Principles of Safety Culture and Just Culture Into Nursing Homes: Lessons From the Pandemic. *J Am Med Dir Assoc*. 2022;23 (2):241-6. doi: 10.1016/j.jamda.2021.12.017.
 11. Raven RB, 3rd, Merrell G. Marketing and Strategy: How to Build Your Practice. *Hand Clin*. 2024;40 (4):I-XII. doi: 10.1016/j.hcl.2024.06.005.
 12. Shahbaz M, Yuksel S, Eti S, Dincer H, Khamdamov SJ. A fuzzy decision-making model for enhancing sustainable tourism investments in climate-vulnerable destinations. *J Environ Manage*. 2025;380:125151. doi: 10.1016/j.jenvman.2025.125151.
 13. Choe Y, Baek J, Kim H. Heterogeneity in consumer preference toward mega-sport event travel packages: Implications for smart tourism marketing strategy. *Information Processing & Management*. 2023;60 (3):103302 doi: 10.1016/j.ipm.2023.103302..
 14. Jahani Dolatabad E, Mohammadi C. Investigating the status of the cities of Ilam province in terms of tourism development indicators. *Journal of Environmental Science Studies*. 2023;8 (3):7073-9.
 15. Sag I, Zengul FD. Why medical tourists choose Turkey as a medical tourism destination? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*. 2019;2 (3):296-306. doi: 10.1108/JHTI-05-2018-0031.
 16. Jia X. Digital marketing and brand competitiveness: The mediating role of marketing capability and operational capability. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*. 2025;87:104429. doi: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2025.104429.
 17. Michael N, Reisinger Y, Hayes JP. The UAE's tourism competitiveness: A business perspective. *Tourism Management Perspectives*. 2019;30:53-64. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2019.02.002.
 18. Wong AKF, Li P, Pan Y, Xu JB, Deng J. Investigating resident perceptions of medical tourism in Hainan: An integrative analytical approach. *Tourism Management Perspectives*. 2024;54:101305. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101305.
 19. Capar H, Arslanoglu A. The Impact of Sustainable Development Goals as a Driving Force in the Development of Medical Tourism. *Eval Program Plann*. 2025;111:102587. doi: 10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2025.102587.
 20. Plzakova L. Evaluation of investments in the tourism sector with a local focus. *Eval Program Plann*. 2022;94:102151. doi: 10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2022.102151.
 21. Cao Y, Du K. Outbound tourism and outward foreign direct investment. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 2024;105:103713. doi: 10.1016/j.annals.2023.103713.
 22. Torabi ZA, Rezvani MR, Hall CM, Allam Z. On the post-pandemic travel boom: How capacity building and smart tourism technologies in rural areas can help - evidence from Iran. *Technol Forecast Soc Change*. 2023;193:122633. doi: 10.1016/j.techfore.2023.122633.
 23. Ozdemir O, Han W, Erkmen E, Madanoglu M. Firm-level political risk and corporate investments in the hospitality and tourism industry: The moderating role of asset tangibility and corporate governance quality. *Tourism Management Perspectives*. 2024;53:101290. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101290.
 24. Law A, Pyke J, De Lacy T, McGrath GM. Towards a community sensitivity index for tourism investment: A case study of regional Australia. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*. 2022;50:412-20. doi: 10.1016/j.jhtm.2021.12.009.
 25. Hayati R, Ansarizadeh M, Yousefi M, Moein H, Alinejad N, Jasour A, et al. Effects of medical tourism on hospital waste as an important criteria of the green hospital. *Case Studies in Chemical and Environmental Engineering*. 2025;11:101051. doi: 10.1016/j.cscee.2024.101051.