

Exploring Health Tourism Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper aims to review some of the most cited scholarly research on the Web of Science database connected to health tourism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is based on an analysis of 103 documents studying areas of health tourism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Documents were published from January 2020 to June 2024. The main findings show that researchers lack attention to the tools and strategies that should be taken by stakeholders to recover the health tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 period. The study enriches the health tourism literature. The study offers several recommendations for the recovery of the health tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations could be used within the management of organizations operating in the health tourism industry.

Keywords: Health tourism, medical tourism, wellness tourism, spa tourism, COVID-19

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, health tourism has undergone notable transformations in its characteristics (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021). Health tourism is an emerging global trend heavily reliant on innovation and effective knowledge management (Ghasemi et al., 2020).

Recently, this thriving industry has had to adapt to new circumstances following the unforeseen onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021). Health tourism service providers face challenging times post the COVID-19 pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic has had adverse impacts on the tourism industry (Šenková et al., 2021), it has served as a wake-up call, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing personal wellness (Chen et al., 2023). Zhang et al. (2021) contend that tourists exhibit a significant inclination to travel as a means of alleviating feelings of depression and pandemic-related exhaustion. Health tourism may become individuals' preferred option once they perceive the risks associated with COVID-19 (Cheng et al., 2022).

Lately, there has been extensive discussion among academics, industry professionals, and government bodies about the profound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the worldwide tourism sector. From a health tourism management perspective, the current context presents an opportune moment to explore new horizons. There is a

body of relevant previous research that underpins this field. On the other hand, there has been rather little directly comparable research on this specific topic.

This paper aims to review some of the most cited scholarly research on the Web of Science database connected to health tourism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings indicate the lack of research on methods and strategies stakeholders should employ to revive the health tourism industry. Therefore, subsequently, this study offers several recommendations for the recovery of the health tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

In this paper, we follow the definition of health tourism according to Aluculesei et al. (2021), who define health tourism as “an umbrella concept that includes medical tourism, wellness tourism, and spa tourism”. Medical tourism entails travelers selecting destinations based on their medical needs and recommendations from their healthcare providers. Conversely, tourists engaging in wellness tourism are actively seeking avenues to enhance their quality of life (Zhong et al., 2024). Dryglas and Salamaga (2017) point out that wellness destinations are usually located in areas with appealing natural settings but do not have to offer natural healing resources, unlike spa destinations. Spa tourism represents a tourism offering distinct from mass tourism or the issue of overtourism (Fletcher et al., 2019). At the same time, spa tourism possesses a health aspect that could potentially aid in mitigating the effects of the pandemic, particularly during the recovery phase (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021).

A similar study by Aluculesei et al. (2021) identifies the literature review in the medical spa field from the tourist and medical perspectives and analyzes papers published from 1997 to 2021 (March). During this timeframe, the association between the COVID-19 pandemic and the subject of health tourism was in its early stages. The bibliometric analysis of papers published from 2013 to 2023 (June) is performed in the study by Martins et al. (2023) and from 2012 to 2022 in the research by Gulyas and Molnar (2023), whose keywords relate to wellness tourism and medical tourism. Subsequently, a recent study by Figueiredo et al. (2024) focuses on health tourism and sustainable development in publications from 2003 to 2023.

The novelty of this paper is that the key terms entering the publication search include the term “COVID-19”. Therefore, this paper provides a helpful background for researchers to better understand the current state of the health tourism fields in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

Data collection was conducted in June 2024. All documents published from January 2020 to June 2024 were retrieved from the Web of Science database. The document selection process is as follows. The first step is searching for documents in the database using combinations of the following key terms “health tourism” “COVID-19” OR “medical tourism” “COVID-19” OR “wellness tourism” “COVID-19” OR “spa tourism” “COVID-19”. The result is 103 documents for analysis. Second, we employ the analytical apparatus of software solutions offered by VOSviewer to explore existing studies relationships and to create bibliometric maps. Then, through content analysis, these articles are examined from the aspects of health tourism and the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Results

Based on the subset of 103 publications, Table 1 presents the distribution of the number of documents according to the year of publication and document type. Considering document type, articles were most often published in the given area. The highest number of documents were published in 2021.

Table 1. Number of documents

| Document Type | Year of Publication | | | | | Total |
|--------------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|
| | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | |
| Article | 15 | 24 | 19 | 22 | 6 | 86 |
| Review Article | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 9 |
| Letter | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| Editorial Material | 1 | 2 | | 1 | | 4 |
| Proceeding Paper | 1 | 2 | | | | 3 |
| Total | 19 | 30 | 22 | 24 | 8 | 103 |

(Source: own compilation according to Web of Science database)

Figure 1 shows the results of the VOSviewer co-occurrence analysis, which generates links between key terms. Table 2 shows three significant clusters identified within the VOSviewer and the keywords. A keyword was included if it appeared at least 4 times in the underlying documents. Clusters of the same color connect keywords that define the same area or related areas. A larger dot on the map represents a more frequent occurrence of a keyword than a keyword represented by a smaller dot. Thicker links between keywords mean their more frequent co-occurrence in publications.

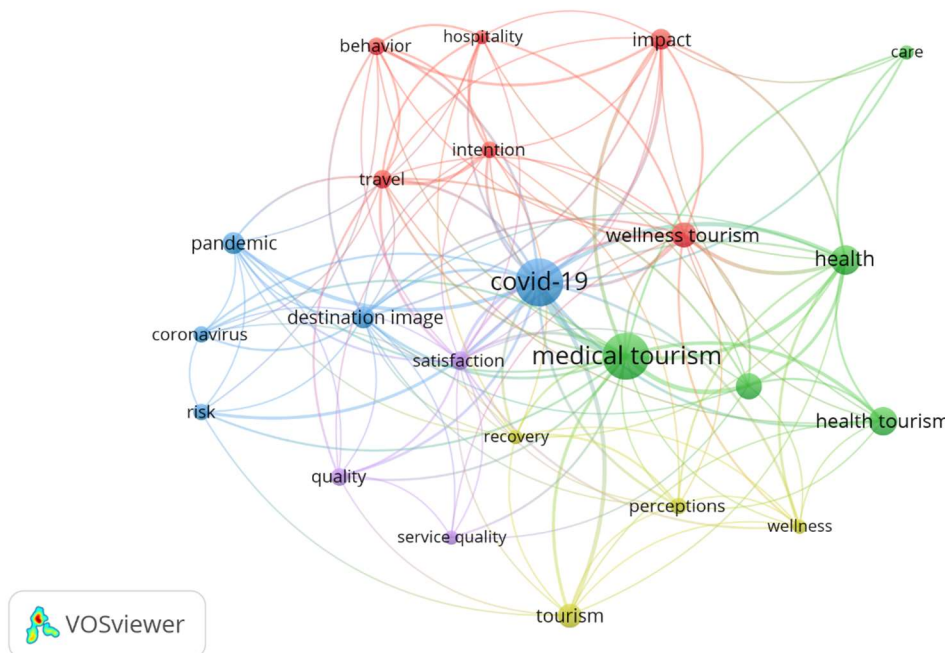


Figure 1. Network visualization of co-occurrences in documents indexed in Web of Science from 2020 to 2024 (Source: own compilation in VOSviewer)

Table 2. Clusters according to keywords

| Cluster | Color | Keywords |
|---------|--------|--|
| 1 | Red | behavior, hospitality, impact, intention, travel, wellness tourism |
| 2 | Blue | coronavirus, covid-19, destination image, pandemic, risk |
| 3 | Yellow | perceptions, recovery, tourism, wellness |
| 4 | Violet | quality, satisfaction, service quality |

(Source: own compilation according to Web of Science database)

Figure 2 complements the analysis by density visualization. As the quantity of items in the neighborhood of a point increases and their weights grow, the color of the point tends to lean towards yellow. Conversely, when there are fewer items surrounding a point and their weights decrease, the color of the point tends to shift towards blue.

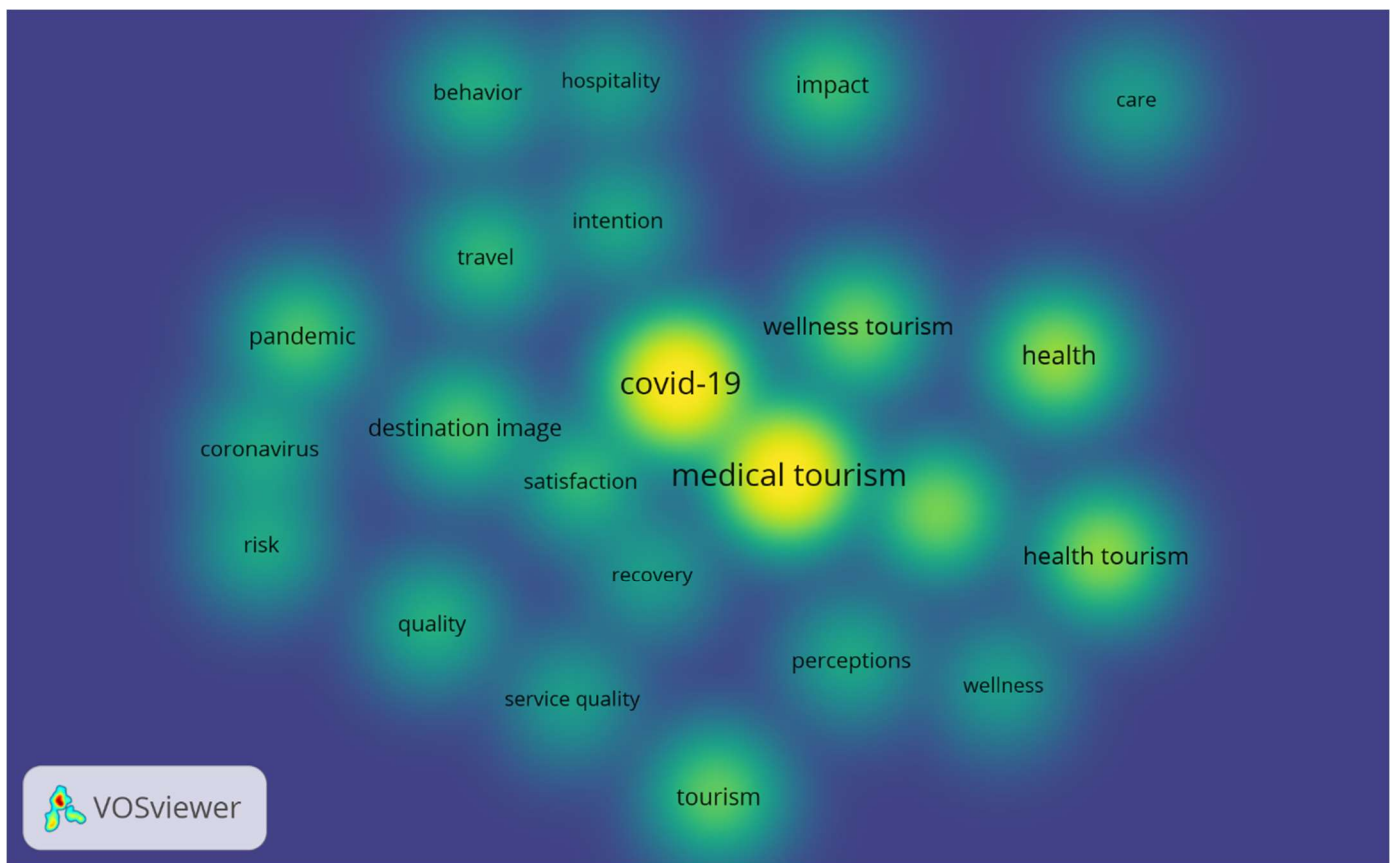


Figure 2. Network visualization of co-occurrences in documents indexed in Web of Science from 2020 to 2024 (Source: own compilation in VOSviewer)

Table 3 presents the list of the most cited documents regarding citations in Web of Science. A publication was included in the analysis if it currently had at least 15 citations. This Section briefly discusses their focus.

Table 3. List of the most cited documents in Web of Science

| Author | Year | Citations | Author | Year | Citations |
|-----------------------------|------|-----------|--------------------------|------|-----------|
| Wen et al. | 2021 | 435 | Pinos Navarrete and Shaw | 2021 | 26 |
| Buckley and Westaway | 2020 | 85 | Kim et al. | 2022 | 25 |
| Chen et al. | 2021 | 53 | Dandara et al. | 2021 | 23 |
| Majeed and Ramkissoon | 2020 | 49 | Abbaspour et al. | 2021 | 21 |
| Ghasemi et al. | 2021 | 34 | Kim et al. | 2021 | 20 |
| Chen et al. | 2023 | 34 | Farrukh et al. | 2022 | 18 |
| He et al. | 2022 | 27 | Aluculesei et al. | 2021 | 17 |
| Cheng et al. | 2022 | 26 | Tyan et al. | 2021 | 17 |
| Shahabi Sorman Abadi et al. | 2023 | 26 | Kaewkitipong et al. | 2021 | 15 |

(Source: own compilation according to Web of Science database)

A most cited study by Wen et al. (2021) explores the anticipated shifts in global tourism and hospitality practices due to the pandemic. The authors explore the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on Chinese tourists' behavior and preferences. Their insights aim to assist industry professionals in customizing their products and services for post-COVID-19 recovery.

Buckley and Westaway (2020) provide empirical support for a new tourism-nature-health theoretical paradigm and show that commercial outdoor tourism enterprises can contribute powerfully to the well-being of women. Even though data from their study were compiled before the COVID-19 pandemic, their importance has increased as a consequence of the pandemic. They point out the strong demand for mental health rehabilitation during post-pandemic social and economic recovery.

A study by Chen et al. (2021) enhances understanding of research concerning the risks of disease in tourism, serving as a reference for risk management in both academic and industry settings.

Majeed and Ramkissoon (2020) explore how the global health crisis of COVID-19 may influence health tourism and wellness tourism. Unfortunately, the publication mentions the COVID-19 pandemic only marginally and rather focuses on a literature review related to the therapeutic landscapes. The therapeutic landscapes theory posits that human health and well-being are closely tied to specific locations (Gesler, 1992), indicating that individuals derive healing advantages from their association with places such as land, sea, forests, and urban areas, fostering an emotional connection with these environmental settings (Ramkissoon et al., 2013). Majeed and Ramkissoon (2020) analyze different perspectives on therapeutic landscapes within a comprehensive research framework. This framework aims to offer valuable insights for both scholars and professionals in service industries. It also aims to aid in the efficient management of therapeutic landscapes and enhance marketing strategies to attract more national and global visitors. Their research shows that individuals strive to visit places with diverse therapeutic landscapes to enhance their health and overall well-being.

Ghasemi et al. (2020) highlight the positive impacts of fundamental areas of knowledge management, such as time, cost, and quality management focus, on operational performance, facilitated by the intermediary influence of innovation speed in the context of medical tourism in Iran. They also marginally deal with the COVID-19 pandemic when developing managerial implications to assist managers and decision-makers in utilizing the acquired insights during both the pandemic and the post-pandemic period.

Chen et al. (2023) clarify how the experiences offered by wellness tourism impact the revisit intention. Specifically focusing on spa hotels, their objectives are to refine the concept of a wellness tourism environment and to examine the intermediary effects of authenticity, memorability, and organizational identification in the correlation between wellness tourism experiences and revisit intention.

Research by Cheng et al. (2022) investigates the impact of community safety support on individuals' perceptions of COVID-19 event strength, risk perception, and intention toward health tourism. Additionally, the authors explore the moderating influence of risk communication on these relationships.

The results of the study by Shahabi Sorman Abadi et al. (2023) offer recommendations for destination recovery and response to the travel behavior of xenophobic tourists caused by COVID-19. However, they focus on the tourism industry, not specifically on the health tourism industry or medical tourism. The findings indicated that perceptions of travel risk are the deciding factor in xenophobic behavior, surpassing even fear of infection by itself. Respondents exhibiting xenophobic tendencies show a greater inclination towards untact tourism, preferring destinations with minimal congestion while avoiding overpopulated areas associated with mass tourism.

Pinos Navarrete and Shaw (2021) highlight the health role of spa tourism within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the case of Spain.

Some papers only mention key terms, but do not deal with the topic in detail (e.g., Kim et al., 2022; Dandara et al., 2021). Others point to biosecurity in tourism and note that medical tourism has also been identified as a possible route for the spread of diseases (e.g., Kim et al., 2021). Kaewkitipong et al. (2021) deal with vaccine tourism as a novel health tourism concept important during the ongoing pandemic.

On the other hand, although some articles dealt with topics related to health tourism, the concept of COVID-19 was only peripheral. Farrukh et al. (2022) study destination image, perceived risk, and intention to travel in the context of medical tourism. Tyan et al. (2021) discuss the benefits of blockchain technology for medical tourism.

The research note by Abbaspour et al. (2021), who explored medical tourism for COVID-19 post-crisis recovery, coincides with our investigated issue. On the other hand, they only deal with revisiting intentions for medical tourism to Iran. Unfortunately, they do not provide specific recommendations for the recovery of the health tourism industry. Pu et al. (2021) realize a similar study and predict health tourism intention after the COVID-19 pandemic using data from Chinese respondents.

The most recent study by Zhong et al. (2024) is also worth mentioning. The authors explore the perception of health tourism and effective health tourism promotion methods from the perspective of Chinese tourists before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Discussions

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our literature review shows that there is a shortage of research dedicated to theoretical and methodological frameworks for understanding the development characteristics and identifying promising directions for modernizing health tourism in the post-COVID-19 period. It's essential to revitalize the underperforming aspects of health, medical, wellness, and spa tourism destinations and establish additional crisis management and recovery plans.

5.2 Practical Implications

In this Section, we summarize some recommendations that we can draw from existing studies. A revitalized health tourism industry will contribute to addressing individuals' physical, mental, and spiritual stress, thereby enhancing their overall well-being (He et al., 2022). The post-crisis measures and behaviors center on retrospectively analyzing the crisis period and subsequently reverting to the standard pre-crisis mode (Chen et al., 2021). Additionally, tourism destinations worldwide might shift their outlooks after COVID-19 by taking into account factors that were previously overlooked.

5.2.1 Health and Safety.

Travelers are inclined to prefer destinations that have well-developed infrastructure and high-quality medical facilities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Wen et al., 2021). Therefore, the stakeholders in the health tourism industry should strive to showcase their abilities to protect tourists from public health concerns while traveling. These efforts encompass reassuring prospective visitors about the accessibility of essential supplies and promoting the locations of clinics and hospitals. The number and standard of medical facilities in tourism destinations may also influence the perception of the destination and consequently impact its ability to attract tourists in the aftermath of COVID-19. When recovering the health tourism industry from the COVID-19 crisis, it's crucial to meticulously plan individuals' travel arrangements to mitigate potential health hazards and minimize tourists' anxiety and stress.

Effectively managing the disease risk in tourism can aid tourist destinations and associated industries in responding to crises efficiently, facilitating swift recovery, and gaining insights to better prepare for potential future challenges (Novelli et al., 2018).

5.2.2 Information, Communication, and Media.

At every stage of the crisis, the involvement of government entities, businesses, personnel within the tourism sector, tourists themselves, and the media is essential (Matos & Barcellos, 2010). Accurate information and effective guidance from the media can positively influence tourists' perceptions (Chen et al., 2021). Hence, the media contributes positively to the process of recovering from a crisis. Conversely, if the media amplifies public anxiety, uncertainty, and other adverse emotions, its actions will have a negative effect.

Health tourism businesses need to effectively enhance risk communication and elevate public health awareness to encourage greater participation in the health tourism industry (Cheng et al., 2022).

The goal of recovery is to mitigate the adverse effects of the disease crisis on the local area. The cancellation of crisis emergency policies, dissemination of travel safety advisories, tourism promotions and implementation of discounts, utilization of media and public relations to enhance a positive international tourism image, and tourism transformation are effective strategies to revive regional tourism and associated industries (Haque & Haque, 2018). The tourism sector can and should utilize various media channels, especially social media, to regularly communicate with the public about their effective crisis management practices.

Providers should create dependable and trustworthy websites or social media channels, as social media serves as a valuable tool for sharing opinions and knowledge across different contexts (Kaewkitipong et al., 2021). Destination tourism authorities could also provide additional guidance on adopting healthier lifestyles for younger generations, underscoring the significance of both physical and mental well-being via social media platforms on the internet (Li & Huang, 2022).

5.2.3 Collaboration.

Developing emergency plans requires adhering to a culture of accountability and responsibility and devising a range of preventive and intervention measures while considering various stakeholders' roles and interests (Chen et al., 2021).

Service providers in the health tourism industry need to cooperate when developing and implementing effective measures to deal with crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial for maintaining the industry, as well as for supporting tourism and hospitality companies, along with other specialized industries, to address people's health and well-being requirements. Consequently, this promotes emotional bonds with places and encourages return visits.

Collaboration among multiple parties is essential to combat the epidemic. One approach to achieve this is by employing bundled sales strategies across brands and platforms to encourage online consumer engagement. After the pandemic, tourism professionals and government officials should assess and evaluate their actions during the crisis and take steps to innovate, minimize energy consumption, and cut costs.

5.2.4 Environment.

Health tourism destinations that face “undertourism” but possess attractive tourism resources and development potential have great opportunities to attract visitors. Innovative outdoor experiences could offer tourists the chance to inhale fresh air, connect with nature, and rejuvenate after the pressures of the outbreak.

The condition of the environment influences both human health and the process of healing (Majeed & Ramkissoon, 2020). Therefore, when recovering the health tourism industry, it is important to present the new concept in terms of places offering hygienic meals, sterile medical facilities, essential medical procedures, wellness treatment, clean accommodation, fresh and pure air, and natural landscapes to enhance the connection of the body, mind, and spirit. Considering natural landscapes, as Ramkissoon et al. (2013) note, green environments frequently evoke a profound sense of purpose in one's life, e.g., people can find in parks healing, recovery, and confidence (Majeed & Ramkissoon, 2020). Considering built landscapes, Majeed and Ramkissoon (2020) state that they have the potential to offer physical settings where individuals can connect with nature, thereby contributing to their well-being and boosting their overall life satisfaction. In this case, we mean community places (community gardens and hospitals), spiritual retreats, spa towns, and holy wells. Moreover, distinctive features incorporated into landscape design (e.g., vegetation, wildlife, water, historical significance, architecture, symbols) enhance people's perception of the positive qualities of therapeutic landscapes, potentially strengthening their emotional connection to the place (Majeed & Ramkissoon, 2020). The concept of a "sense of place" encompasses emotions related to family life, beauty, identity, and safety, which endure and deepen over time spent in a specific location (Cremers, 2020). A profound sense of connection to a location can result in long-lasting therapeutic benefits for individuals' health and well-being.

The aesthetic-affective theory suggests that natural environments hold stimuli that can help individuals regain a more positive perception of themselves and their abilities, while simultaneously reducing stress levels (Stigsdotter et al., 2011). Spa hotel designers and marketers should incorporate essential elements such as health-promoting therapies, mental enrichment, distinctive travel experiences, and nutritious dining relevant to wellness tourism offerings. These components should be integrated into the design of experiential activities and the promotion of top-notch experiences (Chen et al., 2023).

Aside from consistently marketing spa hotels as places for passive relaxation of the mind and body, practitioners should also prioritize assisting guests in appreciating the natural and cultural surroundings of the hotel. They should facilitate cooperation and bonding among family and friends, promoting a healthy lifestyle through activities that enhance tourists' sense of existential authenticity (Chen et al., 2023).

The particular requirements for administering spa tourism treatments and the stringent environmental standards necessary to maintain the health benefits of its primary resource suggest that around spas, other related tourism products emphasizing quality, well-being, and health in environmental, social, and spatial aspects could be developed (Pinos Navarrete & Shaw, 2021). Hence, it is an opportune moment to engage with new clientele and emphasize the significance of thermal centers and their therapeutic attributes. Pinos Navarrete & Shaw (2021) state that the trend is towards a reorientation of spa functions more related to aesthetics, recreational use, and ultimately towards the concepts of well-being or wellness.

5.2.5 Other Strategies.

As a vital method for alleviating stress and rejuvenating both the body and mind, health tourism holds particular significance in addressing the adverse impacts stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic created conditions conducive to the adoption of alternative tourism development models that align more closely with sustainability principles.

Health tourism strategies could focus on “slow tourism”. Slow tourism emphasizes the involvement of local communities, extended duration of stay, and richer tourist experiences (Losada & Mota, 2019). Tourists prioritize the quality of their travel experiences over the quantity (Oh et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic could also offer an opportunity to boost the popularity of tourist destinations that are experiencing a decline or are currently undervalued.

To foster the growth of health tourism destinations in the future, tourism professionals must thoroughly consider consumer preferences specific to health tourism destinations (Zhong et al., 2024). Greater focus could be paid to the development of premium health tourism products to facilitate the advancement of health tourism, thereby incentivizing increased consumption within the health tourism sector (Zhong et al., 2024).

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

This study has several limitations. The analysis is based solely on documents obtained from a single database, which may limit the comprehensiveness of the findings. Additionally, all the articles included in the bibliometric analysis are in English, which might introduce language bias and overlook important contributions from non-English publications.

Future research should address the limitations identified in this study by expanding the scope of analysis to include multiple databases and incorporating studies published in languages other than English. Furthermore, exploring the evolving dynamics, novel requirements, and approaches emerging from the COVID-19 crisis will be essential to inform both industry practices and academic research in the field of health tourism.

6. Conclusions

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the significance of health tourism on a global scale, emphasizing its increased importance. This paper offers valuable context to aid researchers in comprehending the current status of health tourism amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper is based on an analysis of 103 documents studying areas of health tourism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main findings show that researchers lack attention to the tools and strategies that should be taken by stakeholders to recover the health tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 period. It appears that most analyzed publications with the largest number of citations focus on topics connected with the health tourism industry, with limited attention given to the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason is that they were published when the pandemic was still in its infancy. On the other hand, the limitation of this study is that all documents in bibliometric analysis are obtained from only one database and that the articles are in English.

Understanding the novel requirements, dynamics, and approaches stemming from the epidemic can facilitate the recovery of the tourism industry and tourism research from adversity. Exploring how the tourism industry can improve its response at various stages of a disease crisis is a pressing research topic that requires immediate attention. Recommendations in this paper, fully or partially, can be of help to stakeholders across the globe while operating in the health tourism industry.

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