Designing a Qualitative Model of Influential Factors on Brand Hearsay in the Field of International Health Tourism

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Abstract: Today, an intensifying competition has emerged among various countries, especially developing Asian nations, to attract health tourists. Simultaneously, health tourism has been flourishing in developing countries. This trend underscores the necessity of focusing on *brand hearsay* as an effective marketing tool to attract health tourists. Accordingly, the present study aims to design a qualitative model of the influential factors affecting brand hearsay in the field of international health tourism. This research is a qualitative study that gathered qualitative data from a population of experts and senior professionals working in the Health Tourism Department of the Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education, the National International Health Tourism Association, and the Office of Marketing and Development of Foreign Tourism of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts. The sampling method employed in this study was purposive, and data collection continued until data saturation was reached, which occurred by the eleventh expert. In the qualitative phase, data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis and MAXQDA software. Based on the findings of the qualitative section of the research, the factors influencing brand hearsay in the domain of international health tourism can be categorized into four groups: brand hearsay components, drivers, inhibitors, and factors with a dual nature. Each of these categories is composed of distinct components and dimensions.

Keywords: health tourism, brand hearsay, tourist communications, qualitative approach, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Today, brands play an integral role in marketing strategy and are regarded as assets and sources of differentiation. According to Lassar et al. (1995), for consumers, a brand serves as a means to identify the origin of a product, which in turn implies legal accountability for the producers and establishes a bond and commitment with the manufacturer. The value-creating activities of organizations are not solely reliant on tangible assets; rather, the ability of organizations to utilize intangible assets forms the core of their value-creation power [1]. Based on the study by Barreto (2010), approximately 80% of the assets of the world's major corporations and economic enterprises consist of intangible and intellectual assets. As Collin (2005) notes, one of the most critical intangible assets of companies is their brand, which includes both product brands and corporate brands. In many instances, brands enhance or amplify the value of a company's tangible and intangible assets (Sarshati et al., 2018). A brand

is a name, symbol, sign, or logo that identifies the goods and services of a seller and differentiates them from others. As Kluyts (2003) stated, creating and developing loyalty is one of the core objectives of organizations. A brand is more than just a name; it encompasses all the associations that a customer perceives based on the diverse and unrelated features of a product [2].

Moreover, the use of social media in branding has significantly expanded, indicating broad, comprehensive, and generalized organizational strategies for engaging customers through these platforms [3]. Javalgi (2006) emphasized that from the perspective of brand owners, the main advantages of branding include achieving a larger market share compared to competitors and the ability to retain customers through loyalty generation, which, in turn, can reduce marketing costs. Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's positive feelings toward a brand and their commitment to purchasing its goods or services, establishing a consumer–brand relationship [4].

Within this context, brand hearsay refers to the communications related to the brand that occur before the purchase stage, including both controlled communications (such as advertising and sales promotion) and uncontrolled communications (such as word-of-mouth and unpaid media). Berry (2000) classifies brand communication into two types: controlled and uncontrolled. Controlled communication comprises marketing and promotional efforts executed under the organization's direction, conveying specific brand messages. Uncontrolled communication refers to the ways customers gather information about an organization and its services, which are typically beyond the organization's control [5].

Today, with the expansion of the tourism industry and the emergence of new tourism segments—and consequently, increasing competition among active businesses—entrepreneurship in the health and medical sector has gained significant prominence. Both domestic and international health entrepreneurs, leveraging the rapid advancement of information technologies alongside medical innovations, have introduced novel services. Health sector entrepreneurship is expanding at a high pace. For example, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), innovative projects across various medical and health service segments are projected to grow by 13% by 2031, resulting in nearly 2 million new jobs. This sector presents numerous opportunities, among which health tourism stands out as a particularly promising area. Given that health tourism is inherently linked to medical innovation, health entrepreneurs can play a prominent role in this market [6].

Many companies operating in the tourism industry are actively branding their services and destinations to implant and promote their brand in the minds of their audience—a process known as tourism branding [7]. Tourism branding is a relatively recent concept in tourism that seeks to create a unique and impactful perception in the minds of tourists. According to Busa et al. (2017), tourism branding involves shaping a distinct image of a destination for target audiences, with the aim of addressing tourism challenges [8].

Health tourism, as one form of tourism, is defined as a type of tourism focused on providing services that help clients achieve physical, mental, and emotional well-being, while enhancing their overall quality of life [9]. In parallel with the rapid growth of health tourism and the expansion of organizations and companies providing related services, the importance of branding in this sector has steadily increased. This subset of the broader tourism and health industries has become a significant and growing sector in international markets, with an estimated annual growth rate of 25%. It is projected that by 2025, the revenue generated by this industry will reach USD 3 trillion [10].

Therefore, in this large and growing market, gaining a greater market share depends not only on service quality but also heavily on the quality and quantity of branding efforts. Various countries are exploring and leveraging their opportunities in this dynamic market, resulting in intensified competition.

Considering that the tourism and health industries have merged into a highly competitive sector known as health tourism, it is essential to recognize that the primary customers—patients and other wellness seekers—often possess limited knowledge and evidence to evaluate healthcare quality. In such cases, brands and branding strategies play a vital role in distinguishing services and demonstrating superiority over competitors [10]. Branding activities in this field can serve as indirect means of conveying service quality, significantly influencing consumer decision-making and behavioral inclinations prior to purchasing healthcare services. Branding influences consumer attitudes toward service providers by shaping brand image and trust [11].

In this context, brand hearsay is considered one of the most valuable brand assets and can be regarded as a key outcome of brand marketing efforts. Brand hearsay refers to the entirety of interactions between the customer and the brand during the decision-making phase, which may result from brand marketing activities or customer referrals. It functions as a crucial source of information created by customers and the mass media and is utilized by consumers during the brand evaluation phase [12].

However, in the domain of health tourism, studies and research on branding—particularly on brand hearsay, its components, influencing factors, and outcomes—remain scarce. This aspect of marketing seems to have been largely neglected by marketing managers, scholars, and students alike. The tourism industry has become one of the most vibrant global economic sectors, significantly impacting business performance worldwide. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2006), the tourism industry accounts for approximately 30% of the global gross domestic product [13]. Among the various segments of tourism, health tourism has gained increasing importance. The factors driving this trend include rising healthcare costs, limited insurance coverage, the availability of high-quality and cost-effective alternatives, and improved access to wellness services. Medical tourism refers to the use of services that enhance medical and psychological well-being—whether through mineral waters, climatic conditions, or medical interventions—typically undertaken in a location other than one's residence, for a duration exceeding 32 hours and less than one year.

In Iran's Sixth National Development Plan, health tourism has been recognized by the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education as a key strategy for economic resilience and is among its top priorities (Taghavi & Goodarzi, 2016). Accordingly, identifying the factors influencing health tourism brand hearsay and promoting positive outcomes related to this phenomenon can help improve Tehran's competitive positioning in the health tourism sector and support the strategic objectives of the national health system.

Given these issues, this study aims to develop a model for identifying the factors influencing brand hearsay from the perspective of international health tourists.

2. Methodology

Since this study aims to propose a model for identifying the antecedents of users' avoidance of in-app advertisements in smartphone applications, a qualitative approach was employed using thematic analysis. Thematic content analysis is a method that involves the subjective interpretation of textual data. Through systematic categorization steps, codes and themes are identified. However, thematic analysis extends far beyond the mere identification of the manifest content of textual data, as it enables the extraction of hidden themes and patterns from written responses provided by study participants.

Participants in this study included 11 experts and specialists employed at the Health Tourism Department of the Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education, the National International Health Tourism Association, and the Office for Foreign Tourism Marketing and Development at the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and

Handicrafts (Table 1). These managers and experts possess extensive practical experience in this domain and are thoroughly familiar with branding in the health tourism sector.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Experts

Row	Educational Level	Organization	Operational Experience (Years)	Age	Interview Duration (Minutes)
1	Ph.D.	Health Tourism Dept., Ministry of Health	18	49	83
2	Master's Degree	—	21	50	59
3	Ph.D.	—	15	44	91
4	Master's Degree	National Health Tourism Association	29	54	63
5	Master's Degree	—	17	44	54
6	Ph.D.	—	16	57	66
7	Ph.D.	—	23	49	111
8	Master's Degree	—	30	63	98
9	Ph.D.	Office for Foreign Tourism Marketing and Development	28	59	127
10	Ph.D.	—	19	48	71
11	Master's Degree	—	23	50	69

The sampling method used in this study was purposive sampling, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Although the researcher conducted interviews with 14 experts, no new data were obtained after the eleventh interview, confirming theoretical saturation. In interviews twelve through fourteen, no new themes emerged, and the themes identified were merely repetitions of those previously recognized.

To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were used. This interview format is particularly suitable for qualitative research due to its flexibility and depth. The interview questions were developed collaboratively by the student, the academic supervisor, and three academic experts in the field of tourism, selected from among the study's expert panel. A set of general, introductory questions served as a guide for the interviews.

The researcher carefully listened to the recorded voices of the participants multiple times and meticulously transcribed them. Furthermore, the transcribed texts were reviewed several times by the researcher. Based on the participants' responses, both explicit and latent concepts were identified, coded, and summarized. These were then categorized into classes, subcategories, and themes. Thus, qualitative thematic analysis is a method in which raw data are interpreted by the researcher and transformed into categories and themes.

To ensure the validity of the qualitative instrument, the researcher employed methods such as credibility, transferability, and confirmability. To examine the reliability of the coding, inter-coder agreement was used. Based on this assessment, the reliability coefficient for the interview protocol in this study was calculated to be 78.9%.

In this study, the qualitative method of thematic analysis was employed using MAXQDA software to analyze the collected qualitative interviews in line with the research objectives. This approach aimed to identify the key elements and constructs required for developing a context-specific model in the field of corporate banking.

3. Findings and Results

Based on the outlined steps, the qualitative output of the present study—derived from interviews conducted with eleven research experts—was analyzed using thematic analysis (including the identification of open codes, formulation of basic themes, formulation of organizing themes, and formulation of overarching themes). The results of this process are presented in the following tables.

Initially, the interviews related to the development of a localized model of brand hearsay elements in the health tourism sector and the influencing factors on this phenomenon were analyzed using MAXQDA software and an open coding approach. This was done to identify the relevant themes and codes, and ultimately, the related factors. The first step in this process involved extracting open codes from the eleven semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of brand hearsay and its components from the perspective of international health tourists, categorized into inhibitors, drivers, and reputation-forming dimensions.

According to the obtained results, a total of 114 open codes were extracted with a frequency count of 324. After refining, removing redundancies, and merging similar codes, a final set of 107 main codes remained with a total frequency of 312. Below are examples of open codes derived from multiple interviews:

Table 2. Selected Open Codes Extracted from Interview with Expert 1

Document Number (Interview)	Extracted Main Theme	Selected Text Excerpt from Interview	Total Characters in Excerpt	% of Total Interview Text
1	Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Brand-related Stories	Receives information from various channels either originating from the brand itself or beyond the brand's control—these include hearsay, rumors, stories, and news, which can be either positive or negative.	175	0.52
1	Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Audience Knowledge of the Brand	On the other hand, the level of knowledge and awareness a customer or audience has about a health tourism brand can significantly influence their attitudes toward the brand and its reputation.	145	0.43
1	Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Collection of Brand Rumors	Receives information from various channels either originating from the brand itself or beyond the brand's control—these include hearsay, rumors, stories, and news, which can be either positive or negative.	175	0.52

Table 3. Selected Open Codes Extracted from Interview with Expert 2

Document Number (Interview)	Extracted Main Theme	Selected Text Excerpt from Interview	Total Characters in Excerpt	% of Total Interview Text
2	Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Collection of Hearsay about Destination	In the context of health tourism, this network of communications may include hearsay about the destination and the brand providing health and tourism services, even the surrounding security, political, social, and cultural atmosphere.	213	0.68
2	Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Collection of News about Destination	In the context of health tourism, this network of communications may include hearsay about the destination and the brand providing health and tourism services, even the surrounding security, political, social, and cultural atmosphere.	213	0.68
2	Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Information about the Brand	We should note that a brand's reputation depends on a body of information that has been disseminated in various ways and is accessible to the audience.	142	0.45

Table 4. Selected Open Codes Extracted from Interview with Expert 3

Document Number (Interview)	Extracted Main Theme	Selected Text Excerpt from Interview	Total Characters in Excerpt	% of Total Interview Text
3	Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Collection of Hearsay about Destination	It also pertains to the news or hearsay related to the tourism destination, and such information can even overshadow the health tourism brand itself.	155	0.49

| 3 | Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Collection of News about Destination | It also pertains to the news or hearsay related to the tourism destination, and such information can even overshadow the health tourism brand itself. | 155 | 0.49 |
| 3 | Reputation Dimensions \ Brand Content \ Information about the Brand | Brand hearsay can in some way be defined as the total amount of information a person receives about a brand—either through personal effort or through information provided by others. | 149 | 0.47 |

In a similar fashion, open codes were extracted and documented for all interviews. The next step in thematic analysis involved refining and filtering the open codes by eliminating irrelevant or inconsistent codes and unifying similar codes under a single title to derive the main themes. These main themes represent the indicators for the study's components and reflect the detailed subdimensions of the brand hearsay factors.

Subsequent steps in thematic analysis included categorizing the main themes and forming organizing and overarching themes. In these steps, themes were grouped based on the nature of the indicators and their similarities. It is important to note that the results of this analysis were reviewed by three experts, and necessary adjustments and refinements were made based on their feedback.

Table 5. Main Themes and Their Categorization into Organizing and Overarching Themes (Brand Hearsay-Shaping Dimensions)

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Main Themes
Brand Hearsay Content	Related to Tourism Destination	Collection of hearsay about the destination
		Collection of news about the destination
	Related to Health Tourism Brand	Brand-related stories
		Audience knowledge of the brand
		Brand fame
		Collection of news about the brand
		Collection of brand rumors
		Brand-related information
		Individual's hearsay about the brand
Official (Direct) Sources	Visual-Verbal Brand Elements	Brand slogans
		Brand logo
		Brand name
		Brand visual identity
	Advertising	Banners and billboards
		Radio and local TV ads
		Social media advertisements
		Local newspaper ads
		Influencer marketing
		Email marketing
		In-app advertisements
		Native advertising
		Advertising campaigns
	Informational and Communicational Media	Informational brochures and flyers
		International exhibitions
		Brand loyalty programs
		Official brand social media pages
		International conferences
		Official brand website
Unofficial (Indirect) Sources	Media Sources	Reports on radio and TV
		Reports in newspapers
		Reports in professional magazines

	Reports in general magazines
	Celebrity endorsements
	Reports on news websites
	Unofficial brand social media pages
	Reports on social media pages
	Medical and health experts' opinions
	Tourism experts' opinions
Non-Media Sources	Offline community discussions
	Discussions in digital forums
	Word-of-mouth advertising

Table 6. Main Themes and Their Categorization into Organizing and Overarching Themes (Brand Hearsay Drivers)

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Main Themes
Effective Marketing Actions	–	Offering free or low-cost services
		Building trust among audiences
		Performing brand social responsibilities
		Hiring local communication experts
		Hiring local marketing experts
		Employing professional marketers
		SEO optimization
		Prompt and accurate responses to audiences
		Creating localized content for target countries
		Creative approaches in health tourism
Interactive Actions	–	Establishing representative offices in source countries
		Collaborating with travel agencies in source countries
		Collaborating with medical centers in source countries
Advertising-Related Actions	–	Promoting achievements and innovations
		Persuasive advertising
		Personalized advertising
		Positive word-of-mouth advertising
		Sufficient advertising volume in digital media
		Sufficient advertising in professional magazines
		High-quality digital advertising
		Specialized promotion of services and equipment
Media-Related Actions	–	Continuous content updating
		Focusing on high-audience global media
		Developing multilingual websites
		Maintaining consistent media presence
		Social media presence in the audience's native language
		Optimal social media selection

Table 7. Main Themes and Their Categorization into Organizing and Overarching Themes (Brand Hearsay Inhibitors)

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Main Themes
Negative Hearsay and Rumors	–	Negative word-of-mouth advertising
		Negative rumors about a brand
Environmental Factors	–	Destructive actions by competitors
		Intense global competition
Related to Marketing and Advertising	–	Advertising at the wrong time
		Choosing inappropriate communication channels

		Excessive advertising volume
		Poor ad design
		Neglecting SEO strategies
		Lack of investment in advertising and marketing
		Poor audience targeting in ad delivery
		Lack of innovation in marketing and advertising
		Inability to generate a compelling brand story
Performance-Related Factors	–	Repeated failures in service delivery
		Ignoring professional ethics

Table 8. Main Themes and Their Categorization into Organizing and Overarching Themes (Dual-Nature Factors)

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Main Themes
Mental Image and Audience Perception	Audience Perception	Perceived brand benevolence
		Perceived brand honesty
	Audience Mental Image	Perception of the destination country's economy
		Perception of the destination country's security
		Perception of the destination country's politics
		Perception of the destination country's health industry
		Perception of the destination country's tourism sector
		Perception of the destination country's culture
		Overall perception of the destination country
Previous Customers	–	Satisfaction level of past customers
		Quality of past customer experiences
		Spread of brand-related information among past clients
Personality Traits in Audience	–	Variety-seeking behavior
		Level of sociability
		Level of pessimism–optimism
		Level of introversion–extraversion
		Risk-taking tendency
		Individual desire for innovation
		Audience's display-oriented personality
Cognitive Factors in Audience	–	Audience expectations of the brand
		Past personal experiences
		Individual knowledge of health tourism
		Level of interest in the brand

Based on the findings of the qualitative section of the study, the brand hearsay–shaping dimensions include official sources, unofficial sources, and brand hearsay content. Each of these dimensions consists of distinct components and indicators. The components of official sources include advertising, visual-verbal brand elements, and informational-communicational resources. The components of unofficial sources are non-media and media sources. The content-related dimensions of brand hearsay are categorized as either related to the destination or to the health tourism brand.

The drivers that shape brand hearsay in the health tourism sector include effective marketing actions, advertising-related actions, media-related actions, and interactive actions. The inhibitors include marketing and advertising-related issues, negative hearsay and rumors, performance-related issues, and environmental factors. Finally, the dual-nature factors influencing brand hearsay in health tourism consist of personality traits in the audience, audience mental image and perception, cognitive factors in the audience, and prior customers.
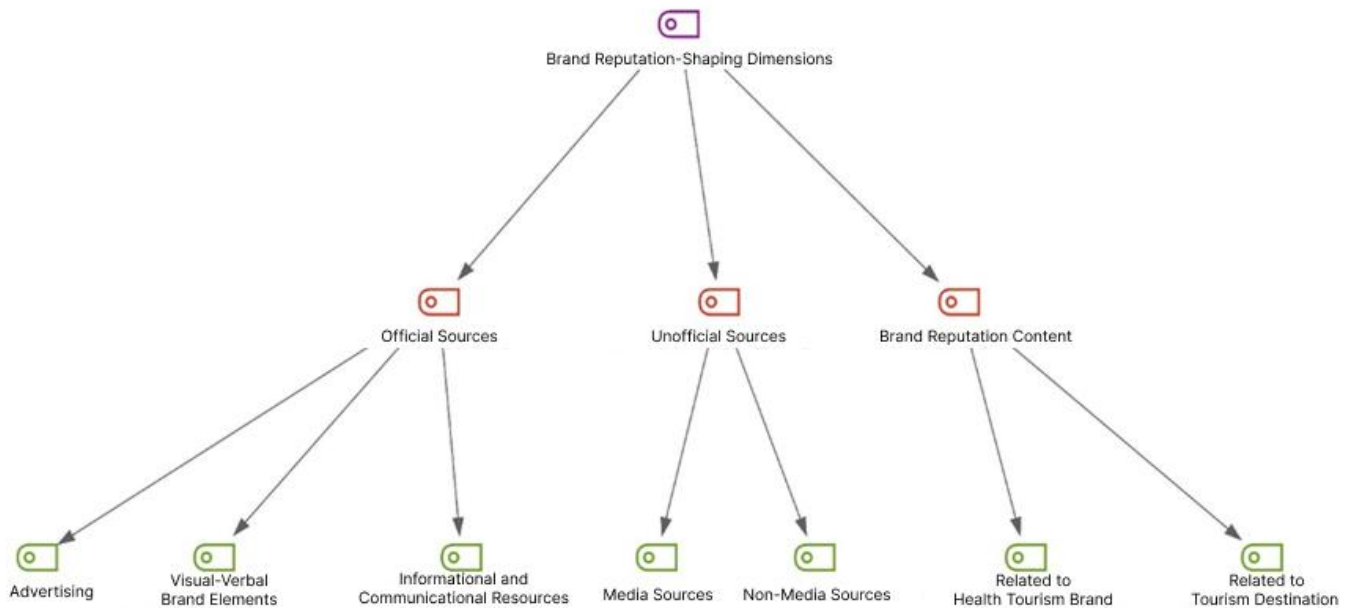
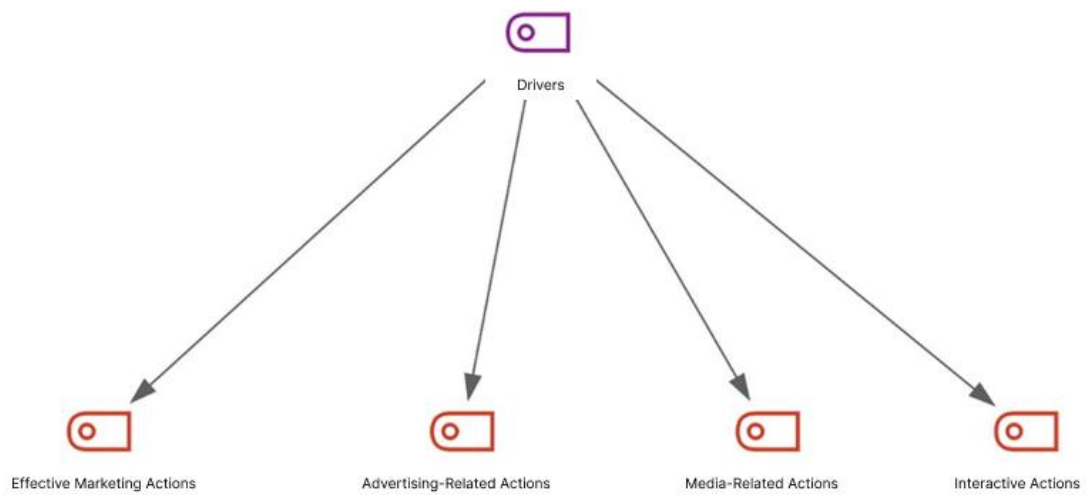**Figure 1. Overall Thematic Network of Brand Hearsay Dimensions**

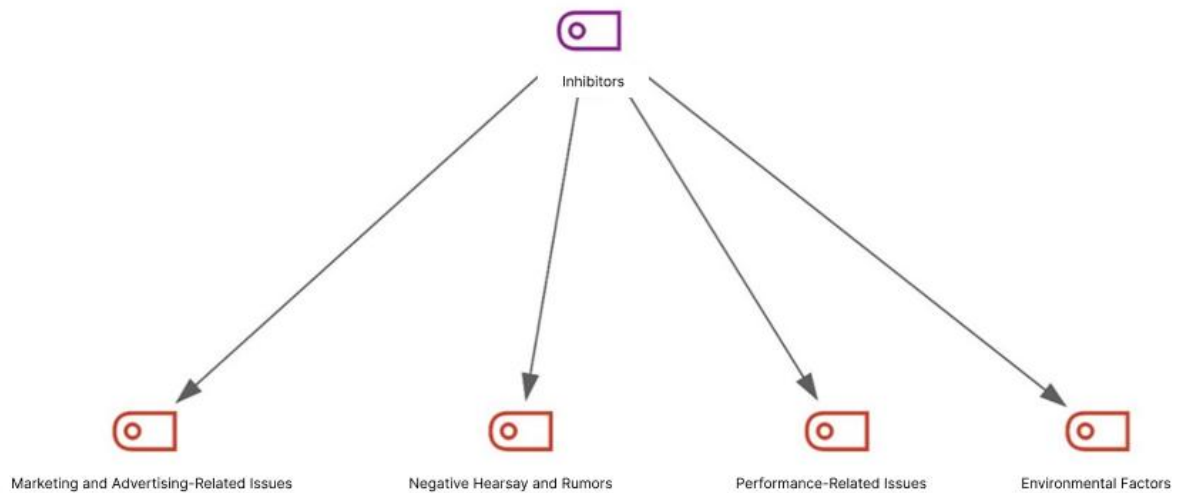**Figure 2. Overall Thematic Network of Brand Hearsay Drivers**

Figure 3. Overall Thematic Network of Brand Hearsay Inhibitors
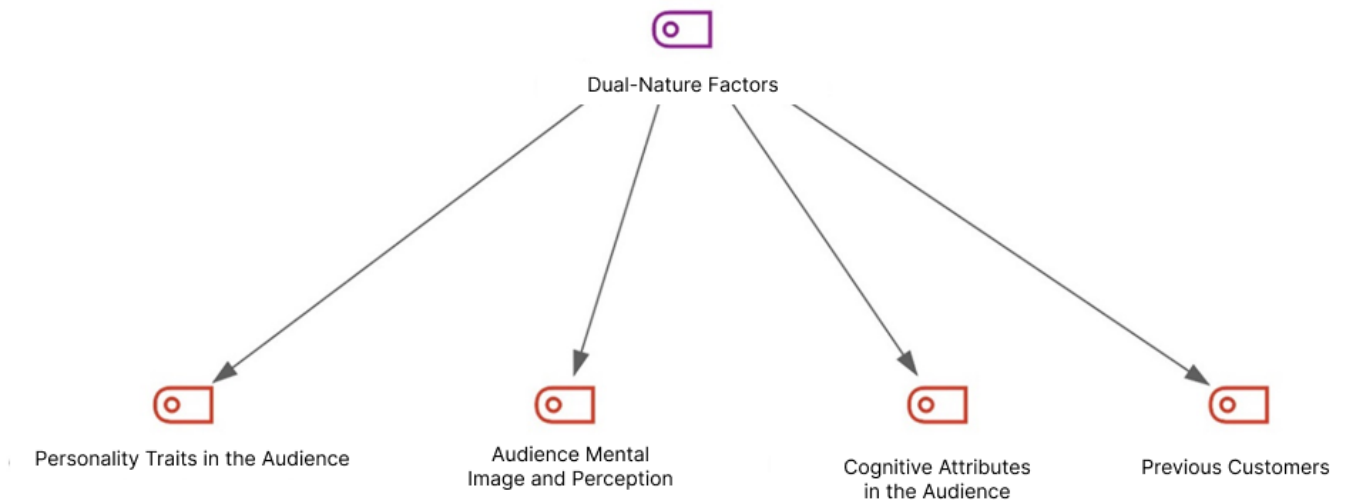

Figure 4. Overall Thematic Network of Dual-Nature Brand Hearsay Factors

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In recent years, the development of opportunities for private sector entry into the healthcare domain—driven by factors such as service outsourcing (particularly in developing countries), as well as qualitative and quantitative advancements in digital and medical technologies, alongside the rapid expansion of new tourism formats such as health tourism—has made health (medical) entrepreneurship one of the most prominent keywords in organizational entrepreneurship today [13-15]. Consequently, this concept has emerged as one of the most significant areas of development, gaining the attention of researchers, policymakers, and economic actors in the global healthcare sector.

According to available statistics, the health tourism sector is becoming one of the most critical sub-sectors of both the tourism and healthcare industries. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the global size of this industry reached USD 720 billion. However, due to the pandemic, the market value declined to USD 436 billion in 2020 [16]. Nonetheless, after two years of contraction, the industry recovered, reaching a global market size of USD 780 billion

by 2023. Projections by the World Tourism Organization (2020) estimate that by 2027, this industry will reach a global valuation of USD 1.4 trillion, contributing over 6% to global economic output. Moreover, according to the Global Health Institute (2024), nearly 819 million domestic and international health-related trips were made in 2019. In the post-pandemic era, this number has exceeded one billion trips annually and continues to rise [2, 4, 16].

Parallel to the rapid growth of health tourism and the organizations and companies providing associated services, the importance of branding within this sector has increased significantly. This sub-sector, belonging to both the tourism and health industries, is now a vital and fast-growing global market with an annual growth rate of 25%. It is forecasted that by 2025, the industry's revenue will reach USD 3 trillion [10]. In this vast and rapidly expanding market, capturing greater market share depends not only on the quality of service provision but also heavily on the quantity and quality of branding activities undertaken by businesses. As countries increasingly evaluate and seize opportunities in this growing market, the level of competition is rising sharply. This situation highlights the necessity of focusing on brand hearsay as an effective marketing tool for attracting health tourists.

In alignment with this necessity, the present study developed a model addressing the elements that shape brand hearsay in the health tourism sector and the factors influencing this phenomenon. As a result, components, dimensions, and indicators related to antecedents and consequences of brand hearsay were identified. In this study, the elements that shape brand hearsay in health tourism were categorized into four overarching dimensions: brand hearsay–shaping dimensions, drivers, inhibitors, and dual-nature factors. Each of these dimensions consists of various components and subdimensions.

Based on expert opinions in this study, the brand hearsay–shaping dimensions include official sources, unofficial sources, and brand hearsay content, each of which is composed of distinct components and indicators. Specifically, the components of official sources include advertising, visual-verbal brand elements, and informational-communicational resources. The components of unofficial sources comprise non-media and media sources. Content-related elements involve both destination-related and brand-related information in health tourism.

According to the experts, the drivers shaping brand hearsay in health tourism include effective marketing actions, advertising-related actions, media-related actions, and interactive strategies. The inhibitors include marketing and advertising-related obstacles, negative hearsay and rumors, performance-related challenges, and environmental factors.

Finally, the dual-nature factors influencing brand hearsay in health tourism were identified as personality traits in the audience, mental image and perceptions of the audience, cognitive attributes of the audience, and previous customers.

The findings of this study align with the recent study conducted by Saleh et al. (2023), which demonstrated that customer satisfaction influences brand attitude, brand attitude impacts perceived quality, and perceived quality affects brand judgment and ultimately customer purchase intention. This chain of effects leads to customer loyalty [9]. Interestingly, while rumors had no direct effect, they exerted a weak indirect impact on the customer–brand relationship. Brand trust served as a mediator in the relationship between negative word-of-mouth and customer–brand interaction.

These findings are also consistent with studies by Moharramzadeh et al. (2023) and Shirmohammadi et al. (2023). The study by Moharramzadeh et al. (2023) found that information quality (including intrinsic and contextual quality) and service quality (including availability and adequacy) perceived from online-to-offline mobile shopping applications—when combined with perceived privacy protection—affect tourist delight and health tourism brand

hearsay [15]. Shirmohammadi et al. (2023) further showed that the greater the brand fame and reputation among consumers, the more likely customers are to choose and purchase from that brand [17].

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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