



A bibliometric analysis of postgraduate theses on health tourism in Türkiye

Türkiye’de sağlık turizmi alanında hazırlanan tezlerin bibliyometrik incelemesi

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to conduct a bibliometric analysis of postgraduate theses related to health tourism in Türkiye to reveal academic productivity and thematic trends in the field. Health tourism, defined as traveling abroad to receive medical services, has become a rapidly expanding sector due to global disparities in healthcare quality, accessibility, and cost. Türkiye has emerged as a competitive destination thanks to its advanced health infrastructure, qualified workforce, and cost advantages. Using the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) Thesis Database, theses published between 2015 and 2024 were reviewed through a descriptive research design. A purposive sampling approach was applied to include open-access master’s and doctoral theses containing the keyword “health tourism.” Data were analysed according to variables such as thesis year, university, institute, department, advisor title, thesis type, and keywords. Descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) were used via Microsoft Excel, and results were visualized through tables and graphs. The study aims to map the academic development of health tourism research in Türkiye and to provide guidance for future studies and strategic planning in this growing interdisciplinary field. When examining the distribution of theses by year, thesis production has shown a sharp increase since 2021 and reached its highest level in 2024. Departmental analysis reveals that the highest research output was observed in Health Tourism Management (31), followed by Business Administration (30), Tourism and Hotel Management (20), and Health Management (18). Regarding the distribution of master’s theses by university, Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University (15.1%), Sivas Cumhuriyet University (10.5%), and Aydın Adnan Menderes University (6.6%) stand out as the leading institutions in academic production.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de sağlık turizmi alanındaki akademik üretkenliği ve tematik eğilimleri ortaya koymak amacıyla, sağlık turizmi konulu lisansüstü tezlerin bibliyometrik analizini yapmayı hedeflemiştir. Sağlık turizmi, sağlık hizmeti almak amacıyla başka bir ülkeye seyahat edilmesi olarak tanımlanmakta olup; sağlık hizmetlerinin kalite, erişilebilirlik ve maliyet açısından ülkeler arasında gösterdiği farklılıklar nedeniyle hızla büyüyen bir sektör haline gelmiştir. Türkiye, gelişmiş sağlık altyapısı, nitelikli iş gücü ve maliyet avantajı sayesinde bu alanda rekabetçi bir destinasyon olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Çalışmada, Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Tez Veri Tabanı kullanılarak 2015–2024 yılları arasında yayımlanan tezler betimsel bir araştırma tasarımı çerçevesinde incelenmiştir. “Sağlık turizmi” anahtar kelimesini içeren açık erişimli yüksek lisans ve doktora tezleri amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilmiştir. Veriler; tez yılı, üniversite, enstitü, anabilim dalı, danışman unvanı, tez türü ve anahtar kelimeler gibi değişkenlere göre analiz edilmiştir. Betimsel istatistikler (frekans ve yüzde dağılımları) Microsoft Excel programı aracılığıyla hesaplanmış; bulgular tablolar ve grafiklerle görselleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de sağlık turizmi alanındaki akademik araştırmaların gelişim eğilimlerini haritalandırarak, gelecekteki araştırmalara ve stratejik planlamalara yol göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Tezlerin yıllara göre dağılımı incelendiğinde, tez üretiminin 2021 yılından itibaren keskin bir artış gösterdiği ve 2024 yılında en yüksek seviyeye ulaştığı görülmüştür. Bölümsel analizler, en yüksek araştırma çıktısının Sağlık Turizmi İşletmeciliği (31) anabilim dalında olduğunu, bunu sırasıyla İşletme (30), Turizm ve Otel İşletmeciliği (20) ve Sağlık Yönetimi (18) bölümlerinin izlediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Yüksek lisans tezlerinin üniversitelere göre dağılımı açısından ise Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat Üniversitesi (%15,1), Sivas Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi (%10,5) ve Aydın Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi (%6,6) akademik üretimde önde gelen kurumlar olarak dikkat çekmektedir.

Key Words:

Health Tourism, Bibliometric Analysis, Academic Trends

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Sağlık Turizmi, Bibliyometrik Analiz, Akademik Trendler

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector stands as one of the most dynamic components of the global economy, serving as a major source of growth, employment, and foreign exchange earnings. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals reached 1.4 billion in 2018, while tourism revenues exceeded USD 1.7 trillion. This expansion indicates that tourism has grown faster than global GDP and merchandise exports, strengthening its role as a key driver of sustainable economic development (UNWTO, 2019). As a result, travel motivated by health and well-being has gained remarkable momentum, positioning health tourism as one of the fastest-growing sub-sectors of global tourism (Letunovska, Kwilinski & Kaminska, 2020).

Health tourism is defined as the act of traveling abroad to receive healthcare services and is fundamentally driven by disparities in healthcare quality, accessibility, and cost between countries (Lukose et al., 2024). While the high cost and long waiting times in developed countries push patients abroad, developing countries offering high-quality yet affordable care have become attractive destinations (Latief & Ulfa, 2024). This phenomenon encompasses not only medical treatments but also thermal, rehabilitation, elderly, and disability-related tourism services (Seren, 2024).

Türkiye stands out as one of the leading destinations in health tourism due to its advanced healthcare infrastructure, qualified medical staff, cost advantages, and strategic geographic location (Karadurmuş & Sevim, 2024). In 2018, Türkiye ranked as the world's sixth most visited destination with 46 million international arrivals and tourism revenues exceeding USD 25 billion (UNWTO, 2019). Surpassing these pre-pandemic figures, recent official data reveal that the country hosted 56.7 million visitors and generated USD 54.3 billion in tourism revenue in 2023 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2024). These data highlight Türkiye's growing competitiveness in medical and thermal tourism.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of academic studies on health tourism. Bibliometric analyses based on Scopus, PubMed, and Web of Science databases reveal a sharp rise in publications, particularly after 2018 (Dağ, 2025; Sağ et al., 2022). Studies focusing on Türkiye indicate that academic output is predominantly concentrated at the master's level and that research in this field has adopted an interdisciplinary nature (Orhan, 2022; Suban, 2023). The significance of bibliometric analyses lies in their capacity to systematically identify current research trends, gaps, and emerging directions within the literature (Letunovska et al., 2020; Dağ, 2025). Health tourism has evolved into a strategically structured sector where organizational models and governance mechanisms directly influence international competitiveness (Gül & Sur, 2025). The expansion of medical tourism is increasingly associated with digital transformation and AI-supported patient journey management (Karcioğlu, 2025). Beyond economic drivers, ethical and regulatory concerns have become central to contemporary medical tourism debates (Cynthia, 2025).

This study aims to conduct a bibliometric analysis of postgraduate theses in the field of health tourism in Türkiye between 2015 and 2024, in order to determine academic productivity and thematic trends. Using data retrieved from the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) Thesis Database, theses were analyzed based on variables such as year, university, institute, department, advisor title, thesis type, and keywords. The findings are expected to provide insights into the academic development of health tourism in Türkiye and guide future research and strategic planning.

METHOD

This section provides detailed information about the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical methods applied in the study.

Research Design and Method

This study was designed as a descriptive bibliometric analysis aimed at examining postgraduate theses on health tourism in Türkiye between 2015 and 2024. Bibliometric analysis provides a systematic and quantitative approach to assess the intellectual structure, development, and research trends within a specific field (Donthu et al., 2021). The purpose of using this method is to identify publication patterns, institutional contributions, and emerging themes in the academic literature on health tourism.

Data Collection Tool and Process

The data were collected from the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) National Thesis Center, an official and publicly accessible digital repository containing all master's and doctoral theses completed in Türkiye. The search was performed using the keyword "health tourism" in the thesis titles, abstracts, and keywords. All theses published between 2015 and 2024 were reviewed. To ensure ethical compliance, only open-access theses were included in the analysis. Theses under access restriction or containing confidential information were excluded.

The collected theses were recorded in Microsoft Excel, which served as the main data analysis tool. Each thesis was coded according to descriptive variables such as:

- Year of publication
- University and institute
- Department (discipline)
- Advisor's academic title
- Type of thesis (master's, doctoral, or specialty)
- Keywords

Validity and Reliability

Since the data were obtained from the official YÖK Thesis Database — a verified and government-maintained source- the dataset is considered valid and reliable. Data were double-checked to avoid duplicates, and coding consistency was ensured through cross-verification by the researchers.

Ethical Considerations

Because the study relied entirely on publicly available documents, no personal or sensitive information was used. Therefore, formal ethics committee approval was not required. Nevertheless, the study adhered to the general principles of research ethics, transparency, and academic integrity as outlined by the YÖK and international ethical standards.

Data Set and Inclusion Criteria

The study consisted of theses related to health tourism in Türkiye between 2015 and 2024. All theses meeting the predefined inclusion criteria were included. Theses were included if they directly focused on health tourism. Duplicate and irrelevant records were excluded. The final dataset was determined after applying these inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage distributions were used to summarize the data. Trends over time, institutional productivity, and disciplinary distribution were visualized through tables and graphs created in Microsoft Excel.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, it includes only open-access theses available in the YÖK database; therefore, restricted-access studies were excluded. Second, the analysis focuses on theses written in Türkiye, so the results cannot be generalized globally. Finally, the study uses descriptive bibliometric indicators and does not evaluate the qualitative content of the theses in depth.

FINDINGS

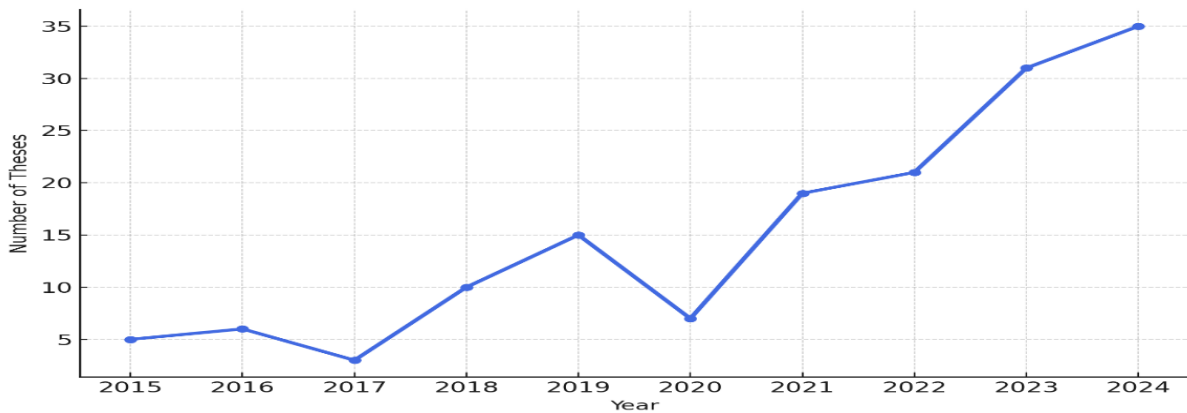


Figure 1. Distribution of Theses by Year (2015–2024)

Figure 1 illustrates the annual distribution of postgraduate theses on health tourism in Türkiye between 2015 and 2024. The data reveal a steady upward trend in academic output, with a temporary decline in 2020 likely associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline in the number of theses can be linked to reported findings on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected research activities and scientific publication output in Türkiye and worldwide. (Günay,2021). From 2021 onward, thesis production increased sharply, reaching its highest level in 2024, which indicates a growing academic interest and institutional focus on health tourism research.

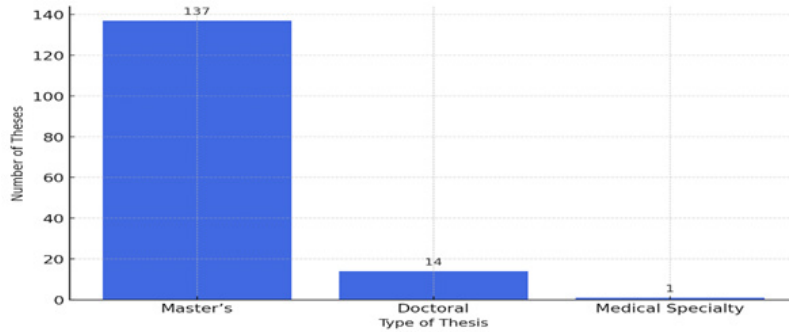


Figure 2. Distribution of Theses by Type (2015–2024)

Figure 2 shows that most theses on health tourism were written at the master's level (137), while doctoral (14) and medical specialty (1) theses remain comparatively few, confirming that research production in this field is concentrated at the graduate level.

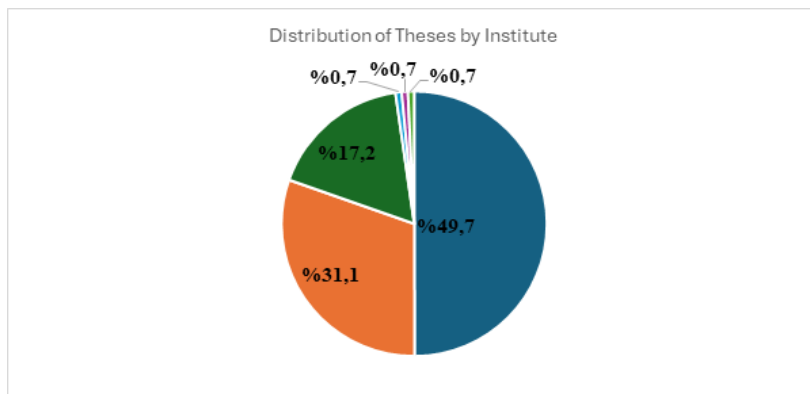


Figure 3. Distribution of Theses by Institute

Figure 3 shows that nearly half of the theses (49.7%) were produced within Social Sciences Institutes, followed by Graduate Education Institutes (31.1%) and Health Sciences Institutes (17.2%). The remaining institutes—Business, Educational Sciences, and Foreign Trade—each contributed 0.7%, indicating that health tourism research is mainly concentrated within social sciences and health-related disciplines



Figure 4. Distribution of Theses by Department

Figure 4 illustrates that most theses were produced in Health Tourism Management (31), Business Administration (30), Tourism and Hotel Management (20), and Health Management (18) departments. Together, these four areas account for most of the total output, confirming the interdisciplinary nature of health tourism research in Türkiye, combining health, management, and tourism perspectives.

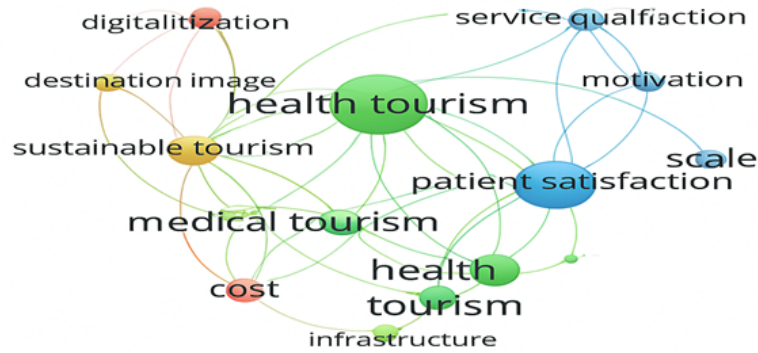


Figure 5. Keyword Co-occurrence Network of Postgraduate Theses on Health Tourism in Türkiye (2015–2024)

In addition to descriptive statistics, a network analysis was conducted using VOSviewer to visualize the relationships among keywords and institutional affiliations in postgraduate theses on health tourism. The keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 5) revealed four major thematic clusters. The central cluster was dominated by terms such as “health tourism,” “medical tourism,” “tourism,” and “health services,” representing the core conceptual structure of the field. Surrounding clusters included emerging concepts such as “digitalization,” “service quality,” “patient satisfaction,” and “destination image,” indicating a gradual diversification of research topics after 2020. The institutional collaboration network also demonstrated limited but growing inter-university connections. Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, Sivas Cumhuriyet University, and Aydın Adnan Menderes University formed the most active nodes, reflecting regional concentration of academic productivity. The low density of institutional links suggests that collaboration across universities in health tourism research remains underdeveloped, presenting an opportunity for future national and international partnerships.

Table 1. Distribution of Theses by University

University	N	%
Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University	23	15.1%
Sivas Cumhuriyet University	16	10.5%
Aydın Adnan Menderes University	10	6.6%
İstanbul Medipol University	5	3.3%
Trakya University	5	3.3%
Üsküdar University	5	3.3%
Atılım University	4	2.6%
Dokuz Eylül University	4	2.6%
İstanbul University	4	2.6%
Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University	3	2.0%
Others (53 universities)	73	47.5%
Total	152	100%

Table 1 presents the distribution of postgraduate theses on health tourism in Türkiye by university. The data indicate that Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University (15.1%), Sivas Cumhuriyet University (10.5%), and Aydın Adnan Menderes University (6.6%) are the leading institutions in academic production within this field. Together, the top ten universities account for over half of all theses, while the remaining 53 universities represent 47.5%, indicating a diverse yet regionally concentrated research landscape.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study conducted a bibliometric analysis of postgraduate theses on health tourism completed in Türkiye between 2015 and 2024, aiming to reveal academic productivity, thematic trends, and institutional distribution within the field. The findings indicate that academic interest in health tourism has significantly increased over the last decade, particularly after 2021. This upward trend reflects the growing recognition of the sector's economic and social importance. The restructuring of global health systems and the structural shift in cross-border patient mobility in the post-pandemic period may have contributed to the increased academic interest in health tourism. Particularly with the establishment of USHAŞ in 2018, the international coordination, promotion, and institutional management of healthcare services have gained a more systematic framework. When this institutionalization process and the post-pandemic repositioning dynamics are evaluated together, it can be said that the increase in postgraduate thesis production focused on the management, operation, and tourism-oriented dimensions of health tourism parallels policy and sector developments.

The analysis revealed that most of the theses (90.1%) were at the master's level, demonstrating that research in this area is predominantly concentrated within graduate education. Doctoral and medical specialty theses remain limited, suggesting that the field has yet to mature into a fully developed academic discipline at higher research levels. The majority of studies were supervised by senior academics (Associate and Full Professors), emphasizing the engagement of experienced scholars in advancing this field.

Institutionally, Social Sciences and Health Sciences Institutes were identified as the main contributors to health tourism research. This reflects the inherently interdisciplinary structure of health tourism, bridging the domains of healthcare management, tourism, and economics. Similarly, departmental analysis showed that Health Tourism, Health Management, and Tourism Management departments dominate academic production, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all theses.

In terms of institutional productivity, Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, Sivas Cumhuriyet University, and Aydın Adnan Menderes University were the leading institutions in the number of completed theses. This finding may be attributed to regional tourism development policies, local health infrastructure, and institutional emphasis on research in medical and wellness tourism.

The keyword co-occurrence analysis demonstrated that “health tourism”, “medical tourism”, “health services”, “tourism”, and “service quality” were the most frequently used concepts, highlighting the sector's focus on service excellence, patient satisfaction, and global competitiveness. The field of health tourism has evolved dynamically, shifting from economic and service-oriented themes toward sustainability, digital transformation, and patient-centered care, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Lukose et al., 2024). These relationships also underscore

the increasing integration of digitalization, destination image, and international patient mobility into health tourism research.

Overall, the study contributes to understanding the evolution and structure of health tourism research in Türkiye. The findings suggest that while academic interest in this field is expanding, there is a need to diversify research methodologies, strengthen international collaborations, and increase doctoral-level research to enhance the theoretical and empirical depth of the field. Recent industry data also support this upward trend. According to the Medical Tourism Market Report (Research and Markets, 2024), the global medical tourism industry is projected to grow from USD 115.6 billion in 2023 to over USD 346 billion by 2032, driven by technological advancement, affordability, and cross-border healthcare accessibility.

Future studies could employ network analysis, citation mapping, and content-based bibliometrics using international databases (e.g., Scopus, WoS) to compare Türkiye's research trends with global patterns. In addition, expanding the focus to include policy evaluation, sustainability, and digital health innovations would further enrich the literature and support evidence-based policymaking in health tourism.

RESULTS

The findings of this study revealed that the number of postgraduate theses on health tourism in Türkiye has increased significantly over the period 2015–2024. While only a few studies were produced before 2018, a steady rise was observed from 2019 onward, with a remarkable growth after 2021. This trend demonstrates the increasing academic and institutional attention to health tourism as a multidisciplinary field combining health sciences, tourism, and management.

The analysis indicated that the majority of the theses (90.1%) were master's studies, whereas doctoral and specialty theses accounted for 9.2% and 0.7%, respectively. Most of the theses were supervised by associate and full professors, showing that experienced academic staff have contributed significantly to this area. Institutionally, almost half of the theses were conducted in Social Sciences Institutes, followed by Graduate Education and Health Sciences Institutes, confirming the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Departmental analysis revealed that Health Tourism, Health Management, and Tourism Management departments were the most productive disciplines. Keyword co-occurrence analysis conducted via VOSviewer showed that the most frequently used keywords were health tourism, medical tourism, health services, tourism, and service quality. These findings highlight the dominant research themes focusing on patient satisfaction, service excellence, and global competitiveness. In terms of institutional productivity, Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, Sivas Cumhuriyet University, and Aydın Adnan Menderes University were found to be the leading institutions in health tourism research, while many others contributed at smaller scales. This distribution reflects the varied but expanding academic landscape of health tourism in Türkiye.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance academic productivity and strategic development in the field of health tourism in Türkiye:

Increase Doctoral-Level Research: Future studies should encourage more doctoral dissertations to strengthen the theoretical and methodological depth of the field.

Enhance International Collaboration: Universities and researchers should develop partnerships with international institutions to align Türkiye's research trends with global developments in health tourism. Diversify Research Topics: Researchers should expand their focus to include sustainability, digital health transformation, and policy analysis within the context of health tourism.

Support from Policy Makers: Governmental bodies and higher education institutions should provide targeted funding and incentives for research on health tourism to support national strategies in global competitiveness. Regular Mapping Studies: Conducting periodic bibliometric reviews using international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science will enable continuous monitoring of research trends and academic performance in this field.

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