



MEASURING SATISFACTION OF TOURISTS WITH DENTAL SERVICES IN KVARNER REGION

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to determine the current state of dental tourism in Kvarner region through measuring their satisfaction with dental services. Relevant scientific literature was analyzed with the goal of addressing the relevance of measuring satisfaction of tourists with dental services. Empirical research was conducted on the respondents who used services of dental clinics in Kvarner region. A structured questionnaire with closed questions was distributed physically in dental clinics, and online. A total of 125 dental tourists participated in the research. Findings indicate a high level of satisfaction with quality of dental service, cultural proximity, quality of information, price, and supporting services. Based on the findings developmental activities for further improvement were proposed.

Keywords:

dental tourism, satisfaction, dental services, Kvarner region.

INTRODUCTION

Millions of tourists travel to other countries to use various medical services. Most common reasons are ability to get a particular procedure or treatment cheaper and of better quality than in their homeland, and from medical experts who speak tourist's language and share their culture. Also, they might be interested in using medical procedures that are not approved in their homeland. The most common medical tourism services imply cosmetic surgery, fertility treatments, cancer treatments, transplantations, and dental services (CDC U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Dental services, as part of medical tourist offer belongs among the most preferred services, for which the demand is rising. The data published by Statista indicate that dental services are second most wanted in the plethora of medical tourism services (Statista, 2024). Many countries worldwide are developing dental tourism and are focused on providing high-quality dental care with affordable prices to tourists. Poland offers cheaper prices for dental services in relation to numerous Western countries. Numerous clinics and hospitals have an accreditation from respected international bodies ensuring high quality standards of dental care.

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The most famous Polish destinations of dental tourism are Krakow and Warsaw. In Poland tourists can save up to 50% of the amount they would pay for dental services in private dental practices in the United States and United Kingdom. Thailand is famous for its world leading dental clinics. Dental specialists attended school and trained abroad before returning to their homeland and financing the opening of their own clinics. Some of these clinics have a JCI accreditation meaning they offer top quality services including dental services under sedation for patients who are afraid of major dental procedures. Turkey is another dental tourism destination that is visited by Eastern and Western tourists who prefer to use low cost and high-quality dental procedures in diverse cosmetic and orthodontic dental clinics. Medical tourism, and dental tourism has been recognized as relevant for the Turkish economy, and Turkish government is investing efforts in developing and promoting it. Dental specialists are world famous for their medical training abroad as well. Ministry of Health also contributes to its successful development through introduction of certifications, this way ensuring all dental service providers healthy experiences for dental tourists. Dubai is also becoming more and more famous for its dental tourism offer, considering that people from United Kingdom, Germany, United States, Austria and Switzerland travel there for dental procedures conducted by top qualified dentists. Some of the most successful dental clinics have opened in Dubai to provide their services to tourists who visit Dubai; e) Mexico is visited significantly by Americans for dental services due to them being cheaper. Croatia is a famous health tourist destination which has been developing medical tourism offer, and in particular dental tourism. Due to growing number of dental clinics, it is offering cheaper dental services in comparison to other destinations. Healthcare services in Croatia operate under European Union law which guarantees safety for tourists who are in search of high quality, reliable and safe dental services (MTM Editorial Team, 2024). In order to be able to satisfy dental tourist's needs, attention needs to be paid to the provision good quality medical (dental) services and ensuring maximum satisfaction of patients, in order to stimulate them to become loyal users of dental services, and to recommend it to others.

Dental clinics in Kvarner, and especially in Istria and Rijeka were among the first ones to recognize the potential of attracting patients from the rapidly developing Italian tourist market. They started conducting marketing activities in the late nineties in Northern Italy. Good traffic connections, and affordable prices resulted in successful attraction of tourists motivated by dental services. Some dental clinics are doing their business quite successfully due to the following reasons: a) they have never compromised the quality of their work, as well as the used medical materials; b) attention is placed on dental professional's knowledge and experience; and c) Kvarner is rich in tourist infrastructure. This way tourists can use the accommodation, and so much more. Croatia's accession to the European Union also contributed significantly to its dental tourism development. Dental clinics started developing due to the increasing number of foreign patients, as more available funds were intended for investments into buying more contemporary equipment and education of dental professionals. This resulted in Croatia, and Kvarner as its region, becoming more recognizable and profiled as a high-quality and low-cost center of Croatian dental tourism (Total Croatia Dental, n.d.). In order to maintain this success, dental clinics management needs to focus on improving their dental service offer and quality, measure the level of satisfaction of dental tourists, and based on the findings make the necessary improvements. The purpose of this paper is to determine the level of satisfaction of tourists who visit the Kvarner region due to its dental tourism offer and discuss potential improvements.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Satisfaction represents a precondition of loyalty of medical service users (Ferreira *et al.*, 2023; Alibrandi *et al.*, 2023; Mammadov & Gasanov, 2017). Patient satisfaction represents the extent to which they are satisfied with the health care services provided by their health care providers. Patient satisfaction represents one of the most significant factors based on which it is possible to determine the achieved success of a particular health care facility (Manzoor *et al.* 2019). Satisfaction of patients with healthcare services are in focus of modern scientific research studies (Kim *et al.*, 2008; Ziapour *et al.*, 2016). Patients approach medical service providers with particular needs, and expectations that those will be met. In order to be able to satisfy them, primary focus needs to be placed on ensuring top quality of medical service, satisfying patient's needs to the full, and if possible, to surpass them (Ferreira *et al.*, 2023). This is in accordance with the research of Berkowitz *et al.* (2021) who state



that satisfaction of patients may be influenced by multiple factors, like their expectations of care (every patient approaches medical professional with expectation of experiencing top quality medical service), communication with the medical staff (patient must feel relaxed and trusting when talking to the doctor and other staff members), responsiveness of a doctor and other staff members (all the responses provided need to be based on knowledge, professionalism, understanding, and trust), cleanliness (during the medical procedure, and in the medical facility in general), ability of proper pain management (all medical services should be provided with minimum of pain, or completely painless), and timely responses on phone calls (setting up the appointments for a consult, delivering the test results when necessary, providing necessary information).

Dental tourism is one of the most developed elements of medical tourism in the world, registering a significant growth (Oltean *et al.*, 2020). According to the American Dental Association, it is defined „as the act of travelling to another country for the purpose of obtaining dental treatment“. Dental tourists usually choose to travel abroad for dental services due to the cheaper prices, better level of quality in comparison to the offer of domestic dental clinics, avoiding long waiting for services in domestic dental clinics that are covered by the health insurance, or simply because some dental specialists do not offer specific dental services that tourists are searching for. Other elements of the tourist offer may also be taken into consideration in their decision-making process, and especially if their mind the destination is profiled as renowned and an attractive one (Demonja & Uglješić, 2020; American Dental Association (Resolution 28H-2008) 2009). Tourist destinations must have more value than just appropriate location for the patient, in order to be considered a dental tourist destination. The value of a dental service stimulates the satisfaction of dental tourists. Dental tourists are in search for high-quality dental services, which is the main motive when choosing a particular dental clinic, and a dental destination. By quality of dental care, it is considered how dentists and other medical staff members in dental clinics provide care for their patients. Dental services need to be provided in an effective and safe manner. In order to achieve this, medical staff of the dental clinic need to uphold the accreditation standards. Providing good quality dental services represents the key for preserving the existing, as well as attracting new international patients. This is the reason why dental service providers are focused on creating value for their patients, in order to enable them to have top experiences, and make them feel satisfied. However, in order to make them feel satisfied, it is necessary to fulfill and surpass their expectations. (Živković & Brdar, 2018; Chillimuntha *et al.*, 2024; Zoltan & Maggi, 2010). In order to be able to achieve this success, it is important to measure the level of satisfaction of dental tourists and make necessary improvements in accordance with the research results. So far research published on dental tourism is still rather scarce in relation to medical tourism in general. Papers are mostly focused on determining dental tourist's satisfaction with dental services, and the effect of their satisfaction on their revisit intention. Jaapar *et al.* (2017) conducted empirical research on inbound tourists from Europe, New Zealand, Australia, Southeast Asia and other countries. Their idea was to determine what is the precise profile of dental tourists, their motives for visiting a destination, and level of satisfaction. They have determined that quality of dental services, provision of good quality information about dental tourist offer, cultural similarities, ability to reduce costs, and provision of supporting services all contribute to dental tourist's satisfaction. The focus of Kesar & Mikulić's (2017) exploratory research was on determining the attitudes of dental tourists in terms of their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with attributes of dental tourist offer in the city of Zagreb. Their findings revealed that their satisfaction or dissatisfaction are determined mostly by the attributes like quality of product/services as well and professionalism and competence of dental clinic staff. On the other hand, attributes like appointment schedule, availability of information, and prices of dental service have proven to have a relatively weak influence on patient's level of satisfaction. Akbar *et al.* (2022) analyzed the influence of quality of dental services, access to information about the offer of dental services, and possibility of saving costs on dental tourist's satisfaction. The satisfaction with the offer can be considered satisfactory since a significant number of attributes were marked with a mark above 4,00, respectively a high mark. The following attributes were marked with a high level of satisfaction: possibility of selection of a preferred dentist (which indicates the loyalty to the professional), quality of registration system, decoration and design of the dental clinic, patient's waiting time before being provided with the dental service, quality of equipment used for dental treatments, communication with dental tourists (provision of information about the dental services, information available in the waiting room), medical staff (their hospitality, dentists' professional behavior, thorough dental assessment, explanation of the potential choices in terms of dental treatments, answering patient's questions, provided explanations regarding the treatment costs prior the



actual treatment, provision of health advices, upholding of the scheduled appointment of the dental treatment, dentist’s competencies and qualifications), hygiene (of the dental procedure, sanitary facilities, and clinic in general), transportation services to the dental clinic, noise management, sense of safety during the stay in the dental clinic, provision of facilities for disabled, dental treatment costs, overall satisfaction of the dental treatment, etc. Only two attributes were marked with a moderate mark (overcrowding in the dental clinic, and facilities provided by Bali Health Tourism Assembly). Youssef Abouzied (2022) conducted the assessment of the influence of dental centres in promotion of dental tourist offer in Egypt. Attention was paid to satisfaction of tourists who visit Egypt for its dental services. A high level of satisfaction with dental services was determined in the study (patient’s sense of warmth when interacting with the dental centre, suitability of price of dental services and booking experience, quality of service provided by the sales service, accuracy of services provided and employees, marketing and promotion activities, and implementation of contemporary technology in dental services). Performance of employees in dental centres was also marked with a high mark (sense of appreciation during the interaction with the employees, employee experience in presentation of dental services and dealing with dental patients, employee attractiveness and clear way of communicating, time management and skills of persuasion, employee’s knowledge about dental services and use of positive language, interaction with patients in function of increasing their loyalty, sense of appreciation when a patient complains and employee’s interest in solving the problem). Research (Lwin *et al.*, 2021; Saub *et al.*, 2019; Akbar *et al.*, 2020; Ramos & Cuamea, 2023) has also proven that tourist’s satisfaction with dental services significantly influences their revisit intention in the future. Findings like these have a significant relevance in further planning of developmental activities and improving the current state of dental tourist offer of a destination. The state of dental tourist offer in Kvarner region is unexplored, which justifies undertaking of the empirical research. Based on that, the authors propose the following research question: *How satisfied are dental tourists with the dental tourist offer of Kvarner?*

METHODOLOGY

Authors conducted empirical research to determine the level of satisfaction of tourists with dental services in the Kvarner region. A structured questionnaire with closed questions was used, and statements were prepared based on the research of Ramos and Cuamea (2023). A five-point Likert scale was used asking the respondents to mark their level of agreement with the offered statements. The questionnaire was distributed physically in dental clinics in Kvarner region, and online by using Google docs forms sent through e-mail by dental clinics personnel to their patients, and through social networks. The participation was voluntary, and anonymity was entirely preserved. A purposive sampling technique was applied, and a total of 125 respondents participated in the research in the period from May until September 2024. The collected data was analysed using the statistical package SPSS, and methods of descriptive statistics were implemented.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Following the authors will present the results of the empirical research. Table 1 represents the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Sample description

Characteristic	Frequency	%
<i>Respondent's sex</i>		
Male	58	46.4
Female	67	53.6
<i>Age category</i>		
Age category: 25-34	21	16.8



Characteristic	Frequency	%
<i>Age category</i>		
Age category: 35-44	51	40.8
Age category: 45-64	30	24.0
Age category: 65+	23	18.4
<i>Marital status</i>		
Unmarried/single	13	10.4
Married	67	53.6
Separated/Divorced	7	5.6
Domestic partnership	37	29.6
Widowed/Widower	1	0.8
<i>Education</i>		
Senior middle school or less	2	1.6
Undergraduate	23	18.4
Graduate and above	88	70.4
Technical secondary school	12	9.6
<i>Household income (in Euros)</i>		
500,00 to 1,000	1	0.8
1,001 to 1,500	2	1.6
1,501 to 2,000	19	15.2
2,001 to 2,500	45	36.0
2,501 to 3,000	44	35.2
3,001 to 3,500	11	8.8
3,501 +	3	2.4
<i>Employment status</i>		
Employee	62	49.6
Retired	29	23.2
Self-employed	33	26.4
Student	1	0.8
Total	125	100

Source: Author's research

Within the sample prevail female respondents (53,6%), while there were 46,4% male respondents. None of the respondents chose the option of not expressing their gender. According to the age category, 40,8% of the respondents belong to the age group 35-44, followed by the ones in the age group 45-64 (24,0%), 65 and more (18,4%), and finally 25-34 (16,8%). In terms of their marital status, 53,6% of the respondents are married, 29,6% live in a domestic partnership, 10,4% are unmarried or single, 5,6% are separated or divorced, and 0,8% are widowed. The majority of the respondents have a graduate degree or more (70,4%), 18,4% have an undergraduate degree, 9,6% have a technical secondary school diploma, while only 1,6% have a senior middle school diploma or less. In terms of the monthly household income, 36,0% of the respondents belong to the monthly income group 2,001 to 2,500€, followed by the groups 2,501 to 3,000€ (35,2%), 1,501 to 2,000€ (15,2%), 3,001 to 3,500€ (8,8%), 3,501€ and more (2,4%), 1,001 to 1,500€ (1,6%), and 500,00 to 1,000€ (0,8%). A total of 49,6%



of the respondents are employed, 26,4% self-employed, 23,2% retired and 0,8% students. According to the country of origin, respondents were mainly from Italy (43.2%), followed by Slovenia (34.4%), Croatia (17.6%), Austria (3.2%) and Turkey (0.8%).

Table 2. Satisfaction with quality of dental service

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Personalized care	125	4	5	4.76	.429
Dental clinic with a certification/ accreditation scheme	125	3	5	4.75	.452
Qualified and competent dental profession-als	125	3	5	4.73	.482
High quality/standard of dental care	125	3	5	4.66	.491
Variety of payment methods: insur-ance/debit/credit card	125	3	5	4.62	.518
Variety of dental specialist services	125	3	5	4.59	.510
Cleanliness and sanitation of the facilities	125	3	5	4.52	.533
Use of high technology for dental care	125	2	5	4.34	.671
Valid N (listwise)	125				

Source: Authors' research

Results from table 2 indicate a high level of satisfaction with the quality of dental services, since all of the arithmetic means are above 4,00. The highest mark was registered for personalized care (AM=4.76), followed by dental clinics being certified respectively having an accreditation scheme (AM=4,75), qualifications and competency of dental professionals (AM=4,73), high quality and standard of provided dental care (AM=4,66), variety of payment methods (AM=4,62), variety of dental specialist services (AM=4,59), cleanliness and sanitation of the facilities (AM=4,52), and use of high technology for dental care (AM=4,34).

Table 3. Satisfaction with cultural proximity

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication using the language that I am familiar with	125	2	5	4.50	.630
Geographical proximity (i.e. not far from the tourist's country)	125	2	5	4.10	.745
Familiarity with the city	125	2	5	4.00	.833
Family/relatives/friends place of residence	125	1	5	3.97	.803
Valid N (listwise)	125				

Source: Authors' research

The results for cultural proximity show that the highest level of satisfaction has been expressed with respondent's ability to communicate in the language that they are familiar with (AM=4,50), followed by the geographical proximity to the respondent's country of residence (AM=4,10), familiarity with the city (as a tourist destination) (AM=4,00), and family/relatives/friends place of residence (AM=3,97).



Table 4. Satisfaction with quality information

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communicate/consult with dental providers via the internet/telephone	125	2	5	4.60	.568
Availability of information on dental clinics offering dental care	125	3	5	4.58	.543
Word-of-mouth (i.e. recommendations from relatives/friends)	125	2	5	4.53	.547
Patient testimonial (i.e. good reviews on the internet, social media, Web pages, etc.)	125	2	5	4.50	.617
Valid N (listwise)	125				

Source: Authors' research

Quality of information is of significant importance, and in particular in the decision-making process when choosing a dental clinic, and a destination. The respondents expressed the highest level of satisfaction with communicate/consult with dental providers via the internet and/or telephone (AM=4,60), followed by the availability of information on dental clinics offering dental care (AM=4,58), word-of-mouth (i.e. recommendations from relatives/friends) (AM=4,53), and patient testimonial (i.e. good reviews on the internet, social media, Web pages, etc.) (AM=4,50).

Table 5. Satisfaction with price

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Affordable dental care (lower prices compared to my city of residence)	125	3	5	4.67	.535
Quality ratio price	125	2	5	4.62	.577
Valid N (listwise)	125				

Source: Authors' research

Prices of dental services represent one of the most important reasons for choosing a dental clinic and a dental destination. The AM for affordable dental care (lower prices compared to my city of residence) was 4,67, while for quality ratio price it was 4,62.

Table 6. Satisfaction with supporting services

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tourist facilities and attractions (restaurants, museums, etc.)	125	2	5	4.29	.579
Transport service/connectivity	125	2	5	4.19	.605
Easy access to the city	125	2	5	4.18	.559
Valid N (listwise)	125				

Source: Authors' research

In terms of the supporting services, the highest mark was given for Tourist facilities and attractions (restaurants, museums, etc.) (AM=4,29), followed by the transport service/connectivity (AM=4.19), and easy access to the city (AM=4,18).



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The paper analyzes the relevance of measuring the level of satisfaction on the example of dental tourists in the Kvarner region. Analysis of the theoretical findings indicates that dental tourism is developing significantly. Dental tourists choose to travel more and more due to the cheaper and better-quality dental services abroad. Kvarner region has been registering growth of dental tourism development over the years, however, as previously stated, no empirical research has been conducted in order to determine its current state. *Quality of medical (dental) services* represents a precondition of tourist's satisfaction and loyalty (Akbar, *et al.*, 2020; Chillimuntha *et al.*, 2024; Zoltan & Maggi, 2010; Jaapar *et al.*, 2017; Kesar & Mikulić, 2017). The results of empirical research have shown a high level of satisfaction among dental tourists who choose to visit the Kvarner region for its dental service. The results of satisfaction indicate that dental service providers are investing significantly in quality and diversity of their dental service, obtaining contemporary technologies used for the purpose of providing dental services, and employment of top-quality dental professionals. Dental providers with the best qualifications and competencies will be able to provide the highest level of quality and standard of dental care to their patients. Cultural proximity indicates how similar cultures are among two or more countries (Takayama, 2013). Cultural proximity is extremely relevant in tourist's behaviour and perceptions, in the sense that the greater the similarity of the perceived culture of a particular destination, the greater the possibility for them to choose it for their holiday (Guan *et al.*, 2022). Our results have shown that dental tourists have expressed the highest level of satisfaction the ability of communicating in a familiar language, which significantly contributes to their entire positive experience and reduces any possibility of potential misunderstanding. Geographical proximity can also be a significant factor in dental tourist's decision-making process. Some tourists can spare an extremely limited amount of time for dental procedures, or maybe they are not interested in traveling to a far away destination. They also might prefer to choose a destination based on how they feel familiar with the characteristics of its offer, or if they have friends and family there who they might visit along the way. This is the reason why they might be more prone to choose dental destinations in their vicinity. *Quality of information* (their clarity and appropriateness) represents a precondition of tourists being able to make an informed decision on whether a particular dental procedure is right for them, and based on that knowledge decide to visit a destination. Medical (dental) services are intangible prior to the purchase, which means that dental service providers need to provide detailed and correct information about the dental tourist offer in order to earn their patient's trust. Online reviews also represent an important source of information and can contribute to the positive decision-making (Runnells & Carrera, 2012; Moslehifar *et al.*, 2016; de la Hoz-Correa *et al.*, 2018; Ahani *et al.*, 2021). High level of satisfaction with quality of information in our study indicates that dental service providers are focused on establishing excellent communication and provision of consults with (potential) patients online and by telephone, providing detailed and quality information, as well as the insight into the online reviews of patients who used their services. Forsyth & Dwyer (2009) emphasize that competitiveness of *prices* represents one of the most important components in achieving destination's competitiveness on the tourist market, considering that studies (Zoltan & Maggi, 2010; Papakoca & Petrovski, 2021; Chongthanavanit, 2018) have proven their importance in the decision-making process. Satisfaction with the prices was also expressed as high which means that dental services provided are affordable for them, respectively they are lower in relation to the prices in their place of residence, and that the quality of dental services provided justifies the price they were charged for. *Supporting services* contribute to the overall experience of dental tourists as well, despite not being the primary motive of visit (Jaapar *et al.*, 2017; Vengesayi *et al.*, 2013; Robustin *et al.*, 2020). Dental tourists have expressed high level of satisfaction with them which means that they are interested in exploring them and spending additional funds.

In order to maintain this positive trend, dental service providers propose the following: a) monitoring the changes on the dental tourist market and well as the the motives of the dental tourists who choose to visit Kvarner, and make the necessary changes in terms of improving quality of dental tourist offer; b) employ top-quality dentists and invest in expansion of their knowledge and competencies; and c) conduct appropriate promotional activities. In terms of the limitations of this research, the authors emphasize the small statistical sample. They will continue collecting the data, based on which it will be possible to make more general conclusions.



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