



Dental Tourism: Understanding Foreign Patients' Decisions to Undergo Aligner Treatment in Indonesia

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Abstract: Dental tourism is an expanding sector of medical tourism, where patients travel internationally for dental care that is either more affordable or offers higher quality than in their home countries. This study aimed to investigate the push and pull factors that influence foreign patients' decisions to seek dental treatments in Indonesia, particularly Bali, as a prime dental tourism destination. Dental tourism encompasses not only general dental care such as cleaning, fillings, and check-ups but also specialized treatments, including cosmetic dentistry (e.g., veneers, teeth whitening), dental implants, full-mouth rehabilitation, and orthodontic procedures, often involving advanced diagnostic tools and equipment such as digital imaging, CAD/CAM technology, and laser dentistry. Push factors include dissatisfaction with local dental services, high treatment costs, and long wait times in patients' home countries. In contrast, pull factors include Indonesia's affordable pricing, advanced dental technologies, high-quality care, and the opportunity to combine dental treatment with a vacation experience. The study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, synthesizing findings from various sources to explore the potential of Indonesia as a leading destination for dental tourism. Interviews with foreign patients revealed high levels of satisfaction, with many appreciating the convenience of receiving both general and specialized dental care while also enjoying their holiday. In conclusion, dental tourism in Indonesia presents a significant opportunity for growth, particularly in destinations like Bali that combine quality dental care with rich cultural experiences. Moreover, the research emphasizes the importance of targeted marketing, regulatory improvements, and investments in advanced technologies to enhance Indonesia's competitiveness in the global dental tourism market. By addressing these factors, Indonesia can position itself as an attractive and sustainable destination for international dental patients.

Keywords: dental tourism; push and pull factors; foreign patients; health tourism

INTRODUCTION

The advent of technological advancements in dentistry has dramatically transformed patient treatment options, revolutionizing the way dental care is delivered. In orthodontics, one notable innovation is the introduction and widespread adoption of clear aligners, which have become a popular alternative to traditional metal braces due to their enhanced comfort, convenience, and aesthetic appeal. Beyond orthodontics, technological innovations have also significantly improved other specialized dental treatments. For instance, digital implantology now enables more precise placement of dental implants using 3D imaging and guided surgery.

In cosmetic dentistry, the use of CAD/CAM systems allows for same-day crowns and veneers with high accuracy. Additionally, laser dentistry has enhanced procedures such as gum contouring, cavity treatment, and root canal disinfection, offering less invasive and more efficient treatment options for patients. The clear aligners provide a more discreet solution for tooth alignment, making them particularly attractive to adult patients concerned about the visual impact of conventional braces.^{1,2} Studies indicate that the ability to remove the aligners during meals and daily oral hygiene routines facilitates better oral hygiene practices and minimizes discomfort during treatment.³

The reduced discomfort associated with aligners compared to traditional braces can significantly alleviate anxiety related to dental treatments. Patients often report experiencing less pain during orthodontic treatment with clear aligners as they progress towards the desired alignment.⁴ This decreasing trend in discomfort, coupled with enhanced aesthetic and practical advantages, has contributed to the growing popularity of aligners among individuals seeking orthodontic care.⁵

Psychological and emotional factors play a crucial role in the decision-making processes of patients seeking dental care. A study noted that stigma surrounding dental treatments can negatively impact self-esteem and lead to higher levels of dental anxiety, which may result in avoidance of dental care.⁶ Thus, the potential for clear aligners to enhance a patient's self-image may motivate individuals considering orthodontics, particularly young adults and professionals.⁷ The combination of aesthetic appeal and improved comfort provided by aligners serves as an effective deterrent to feelings of embarrassment associated with visible orthodontic appliances.

As of late, a significant trend has been the rise of dental tourism, especially in specialist areas such as orthodontics and aligner treatments. Patients frequently travel abroad to access affordable, high-quality dental care. Dental tourism involves seeking procedures in other countries where costs are significantly lower, often driven by high treatment costs, dissatisfaction with local healthcare standards, and the unavailability of advanced procedures.⁸ Popular destinations for dental tourism include Thailand, Mexico, and increasingly, Indonesia, known for its affordability and quality dental services, especially in tourist areas like Bali.⁹

Drivers motivating patients to seek dental treatments abroad include high costs in home countries, which render advanced procedures inaccessible for many.¹⁰ Conversely, attractive pull factors, such as the availability of quality care, opportunities for cosmetic improvements, and appealing travel destinations, draw international patients to Indonesian clinics. Studies on motivations for choosing Indonesia for dental procedures reveal that patients are often driven by desires for aesthetic enhancements and financial savings, along with engaging in leisure activities.¹¹ The interplay of these push and pull factors highlights the complex decision-making process of patients within the dental tourism context.

The growing recognition of Indonesia as a dental tourism hub necessitates understanding both the psychological factors influencing patient choices and the socio-economic factors shaping the tourism landscape. Utilizing systematic review methodologies can help identify key factors influencing patients seeking aligners in Indonesia.¹² Literature from recent years indicates that many individuals seek not only dental treatment but also a fulfilling travel experience, making service satisfaction a critical element of provider choice.^{13,14}

Indonesia has increasingly emerged as a prominent destination for dental tourism, particularly due to its combination of affordability and quality in dental care. The success of this sector is

contingent upon the implementation of effective marketing strategies that emphasize the advantages of dental services available in Indonesia. Enhanced promotional efforts are essential to raise awareness among potential foreign patients about the quality and affordability of dental treatments, notably clear aligners. Clear aligners, which have been recognized for their aesthetic and functional benefits, are particularly sought after by patients who prioritize both dental health and appearance.¹⁵ These aligners provide a discreet treatment option compared to traditional braces, enabling patients to maintain oral hygiene without the encumbrance commonly associated with fixed appliances.^{14,16}

Comprehending the dynamics of decision-making among overseas patients pursuing aligners in Indonesia underscores the imperative for cooperation among dental treatment providers, tourist administrators, and legislators. Aligning dental care services with the expectations of international patients can enhance the overall experience and reinforce Indonesia's role as a preferred dental care and tourism destination. Addressing factors affecting patient choices and improving service delivery can position Indonesia favorably within the global dental tourism marketplace, ultimately benefiting the national economy and public health systems.

METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), and qualitative interviews to explore the push and pull factors influencing foreign patients' decisions to travel to Indonesia for aligner treatments. The combination of these methods allows for a comprehensive analysis of existing literature while also gaining deeper insights into the personal experiences of dental tourists through interviews.

The SLR was conducted by performing a thorough literature search across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The search utilized keywords such as "Dental Tourism," "Push and Pull Factors," "Medical Tourism," "Aligner Treatments," and "Indonesia" to identify relevant studies published between 2020 and 2025. Studies that focused on dental tourism, particularly aligner treatments, and addressed push and pull factors related to foreign patients seeking care in Indonesia, were included. Only peer-reviewed articles published in English or Indonesian were considered for inclusion.

From the initial search, 40 articles were identified, and after screening the titles, abstracts, and full-texts, 15 studies were selected for further analysis based on the inclusion criteria. The exclusion criteria included articles that did not focus on dental tourism in Indonesia, did not address push and pull factors, or were unrelated to aligner treatments. Data from these studies were extracted using a standardized extraction form, which included details such as author(s), year of publication, study design, study population, and key findings.

To supplement the literature review and gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing dental tourists' decisions, qualitative interviews were conducted with foreign patients who underwent aligner treatments in Indonesia. The interviews aimed to explore the personal, social, and emotional motivations behind their decision to seek dental care abroad, particularly in Indonesia. The interviewees were selected from a sample of patients who had traveled to Bali for dental care, providing insights into the push and pull factors specific to the aligner treatment decision.

The interview protocol was semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring the patients' experiences, expectations, and satisfaction levels during their dental tourism journey. Questions focused on factors such as treatment affordability, perceptions of service quality, convenience, and the role of tourism experiences in their decision to travel for dental care. The interviews were conducted in person or via online platforms, and were audio-recorded with consent. A total of 5 patients participated in the interviews, with a focus on those who traveled from countries like Australia, Italy, Germany, England, and New Zealand.

Ten studies were deemed of high quality and were included in the final synthesis. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of recurring themes related to the patients' motivations, experiences, and perceptions regarding dental tourism

in Indonesia. Themes related to push factors, such as dissatisfaction with local dental care and high costs, and pull factors, such as affordable pricing and high-quality care, were coded and categorized.

RESULTS

The interviews with foreign patients revealed key push and pull factors influencing their decision to seek dental care in Indonesia. Push factors from their home countries included high treatment costs, dissatisfaction with local dental services, and long waiting times. For instance, patients from Italy and Germany noted the high cost of dental care and limited treatment options as primary reasons for seeking care abroad. Meanwhile, patients from Australia highlighted the long wait times for procedures as a significant push factor. In contrast, pull factors such as affordable pricing, high-quality care, and the convenience of location in Bali attracted patients to Indonesia. Patients from Germany and Australia particularly valued the affordability of aligner treatments and the high standard of care available, while patients from New Zealand emphasized the added benefit of combining dental care with a leisure vacation in Bali (Table 1).

The majority of patients reported elevated satisfaction with their aligner treatment. A multitude of individuals expressed satisfaction with the sophisticated equipment employed in the clinics and valued the professionalism of the dental practitioners. The ability to continue daily activities without discomfort, unlike traditional braces, was another factor contributing to patient satisfaction. Furthermore, the combination of affordable treatment costs, high-quality care, and the opportunity for a vacation made Indonesia an attractive dental tourism destination, significantly impacting patients' decisions to choose the country for their dental procedures.

Table 2 presents a comprehensive summary of various research studies related to medical and dental tourism. These studies explore a range of factors influencing tourism decisions, with a focus on both push and pull factors that drive patients to seek healthcare abroad. Key factors identified include high treatment costs and limited access to advanced procedures in home countries (push factors), as well as affordable care, advanced technology, and attractive tourist destinations in foreign countries (pull factors). The studies also highlight the role of destination image, promotional strategies, and product quality in enhancing customer satisfaction and encouraging repeat visits. Notably, these factors are critical in shaping the attractiveness of dental tourism destinations like Bali and Siquijor Island.

The research also delves into the challenges and ethical considerations associated with medical and dental tourism. It underscores the need for quality assurance mechanisms, bilateral agreements between countries, and updated regulations to ensure ethical practices in the industry. Additionally, the studies stress the importance of strategic planning, international collaborations, and targeted marketing efforts to enhance the competitiveness of medical tourism destinations. The research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping global dental tourism trends and offer valuable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders to develop sustainable, high-quality tourism experiences for foreign patients.

DISCUSSION

Indonesia's attractive travel location enhances its standing in the worldwide dental tourism market, indicating that savvy marketing could successfully leverage these advantages to draw a wider clientele. The concept that Indonesia provides not only dental care but also an extensive tourism experience bolsters the nation's competitive positioning. Participants emphasised the pleasure of vacationing while undergoing treatment as a crucial element in their decision-making process. Reports in the field suggest that this leisure element is crucial in motivating medical tourists, who seek to maximize the value of their travels by integrating healthcare with enjoyable activities.¹⁷ Given Indonesia's reputation as an enchanting tourist hub, its potential to serve as a dual-purpose destination for dental treatment and leisure underscores its attractiveness to foreign patients.¹⁸ It becomes essential for Indonesian dental tourism stakeholders to harness this synergy through targeted marketing and promotional strategies that highlight this unique value proposition.

As foreign patients share their positive experiences regarding the quality of care and state-of-the-art procedures available in Indonesia, such testimonials contribute significantly to the overall positive perception of Indonesian dental services. Such feedback emphasizes the critical role of patient experience in the success of dental tourism, where the perceived quality of care influences patients' intent to recommend the services to peers and family members.¹⁹ It is clear that ensuring high patient satisfaction, bolstered by advanced treatment options and tailored tourism experiences, is paramount in reinforcing Indonesia's emerging status in the global dental tourism sector.

Healthcare providers in Indonesia persist in investing in technology and enhancing their professional competencies; sustaining competitive pricing structures will be essential. This method corresponds with findings that emphasise the influence of cost on patient satisfaction and subsequent intentions to return. Previous studies have demonstrated that effective cost management directly correlates with patients' likelihood of returning for further treatments and recommending services to others.²⁰ By comprehending and incorporating these dynamics, Indonesian dental clinics can augment their attractiveness.

The reviewed studies offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape dental tourism, particularly focusing on the push and pull dynamics that influence foreign patients seeking dental care abroad. As highlighted by Brescia et al.,²¹ the key push factors for dental tourism include high treatment costs and limited access to advanced procedures in patients' home countries. Indonesia presents an attractive alternative for foreign patients due to its affordable dental care services and the availability of advanced procedures at a fraction of the cost in developed countries. Moreover, the economic pressures of expensive domestic treatments further drive patients toward destinations like Indonesia, which offers high-quality dental care at competitive prices.²² The affordability of dental services, coupled with a favorable exchange rate, makes Indonesia a cost-effective dental tourism destination for patients from developed countries.

The pull factors for dental tourism in Indonesia are significantly influenced by the country's image as an affordable and desirable travel destination.²³ Argue that foreign tourists are increasingly attracted to destinations that offer not only medical services but also cultural and leisure experiences. Bali, in particular, stands out as a prime destination for dental tourists, offering the opportunity to receive dental treatment while enjoying the island's cultural richness and natural beauty. This integration of dental care with a vacation experience enhances the appeal of Indonesia as a dental tourism destination. Similarly, the findings of Sukma²⁴ highlight the importance of destination image and promotional efforts in attracting international patients. Effective promotion that emphasizes both the dental services and the overall travel experience can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and increase the likelihood of repeat visits.

However, despite these promising opportunities, several challenges remain in maximizing Indonesia's potential in the dental tourism sector. Dwiastuti and Ratih²⁵ point out that the lack of effective promotional strategies and regulatory frameworks hinders the growth of dental tourism in Bali. While the island offers affordable and high-quality services, the absence of a robust marketing approach and clear legal frameworks limits its ability to attract a larger number of foreign patients. As Mucaj notes,²² ethical concerns regarding patient safety and the standardization of care are common challenges in global dental tourism. These concerns are particularly pertinent in Indonesia, where regulatory oversight in the dental tourism sector is still developing. To address these challenges, the need for bilateral agreements and quality assurance mechanisms is emphasized by Brescia et al.²¹ These measures would help ensure that dental tourism in Indonesia meets international standards for care and patient safety.

The role of technology and sustainability in dental tourism is another crucial factor highlighting the importance of economic efficiency, reduced waiting times, and access to cutting-edge technology in attracting dental tourists.²⁶ The post-pandemic shift has made these factors even more important, as patients seek efficient and timely dental procedures without compromising quality. In Indonesia, integrating advanced dental technologies and improving service delivery will be key to attracting international patients. Furthermore, Banerjee et al.²⁷ stress the importance of

sustainability and social responsibility in the medical tourism industry. These principles are highly relevant for dental tourism, where the growth of the sector must be managed responsibly to ensure long-term benefits for both the local population and international patients.

Wang et al²⁸ examine the influence of special economic zones (SEZs) and visa-free policies on international tourist arrivals in Indonesia. They find that SEZ policies positively impact tourist arrivals, while visa-free policies show a negative effect. This insight suggests that while the simplification of visa processes could encourage more dental tourists, the quality of the visitor experience must be managed carefully. For dental tourism, the focus should be on attracting high-quality patients while maintaining a sustainable flow of visitors. Bentley²⁹ also emphasizes the importance of strategic planning and collaboration between healthcare providers and tourism stakeholders. For Indonesia to capitalize on the growing dental tourism market, these collaborations are essential in creating a seamless experience for international patients.

Chang and Ayob²⁷ highlight the risks and benefits of medical tourism, particularly in dental care. While dental procedures are among the most sought-after treatments, the quality of care, accessibility, and the associated risks of medical travel remain significant concerns. These issues underscore the need for dental tourism in Indonesia to focus on maintaining high standards of care, ensuring accessibility, and addressing any potential risks associated with medical travel. As the dental tourism sector in Indonesia continues to grow, it will be essential to prioritize patient safety and care quality, ensuring that the sector remains competitive and trustworthy.

Indonesia's dental tourism potential is not limited to Australian tourists, who currently dominate patient flows to Bali, but also extends to patients from other countries such as New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, and even parts of Europe. These patients are attracted not only by the affordability of treatments but also by the reputation of certain clinics, the availability of specialized procedures (e.g., dental implants, veneers, and oral surgeries), and the possibility of enjoying world-class tourism experiences. To fully harness this potential, Indonesia must prioritize the development of strategic marketing campaigns that emphasize both the quality of care and the cultural uniqueness of destinations like Bali. Furthermore, government and industry collaboration is needed to establish a clear and consistent regulatory framework, promote ethical standards, and ensure safety across all clinics. These efforts would help foster international trust and diversify Indonesia's dental tourism clientele beyond its current core markets.

CONCLUSION

Dental tourism in Indonesia presents a significant opportunity for growth, particularly in destinations like Bali that combine quality dental care with rich cultural experiences. However, to capitalize on this potential, key challenges such as inconsistent regulations, lack of standardization, and limited international promotion must be addressed. Strategic efforts to improve governance, invest in advanced technologies, and ensure patient safety are essential for building trust and long-term competitiveness. With coordinated action from stakeholders and government support, Indonesia can establish itself as a leading and trusted destination in the global dental tourism market.

Conflict of Interest

The authors affirm no conflict of interest in this study.

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Table 1. Interview findings foreign patient aligner care at XYZ Bali Dental Clinic

Patients' origins	Motivations (push factors)	Pull factors	Satisfaction	Impact on decision
Italy	High treatment costs in home country, dissatisfaction with local dental services	Affordable pricing, high-quality treatment options, convenience of location	Highly satisfied with the treatment, appreciated the flexibility of aligners	Affordable pricing and quality care were the key deciding factors
Germany	Long waiting times in home country, dissatisfaction with available treatments	Affordable pricing, high level of professionalism in the clinic, modern technology	Impressed with the care provided, felt that the technology used was advanced	The quality of care and affordability influenced decision-making
Australia	High costs and limited options in home country, desire for a more aesthetic solution	Affordable treatment compared to home country, skilled professionals, cultural appeal of Bali	Satisfied with the results and the ability to continue activities without discomfort	The opportunity to combine a vacation with dental treatment was a deciding factor
England	Dissatisfaction with local healthcare quality and high prices	High-quality care, advanced dental technologies, opportunity to combine treatment with tourism	Overall satisfied, felt more confident post-treatment	Pull factor: Bali's combination of tourism and quality dental care made it an attractive destination
Timor Leste	Limited orthodontic treatment options (aligners not yet available), long queues, unavailable doctors, and payment limitations (no credit card).	Lower treatment costs, friendly service, clean and comfortable clinics, accessible information via TikTok and friends, able to communicate in Bahasa Indonesia.	Very satisfied, felt well cared for, service perceived as better than in Timor Leste.	Affordable pricing and quality service along with social media and friend recommendations were key deciding factors.
Singapore	Very high treatment costs in home country, long waiting times.	Lower costs, professional and friendly staff, modern facilities, cultural and language comfort, easily accessible information.	Very satisfied, felt personally attended to, smooth treatment process.	Combination of affordability, communication comfort, and friend recommendations were primary reasons for choosing Indonesia.
New Zealand	Seeking affordable treatment with the opportunity to visit family in Bali	Affordable pricing, excellent quality of care, added bonus of tourism experience in Bali	Very satisfied with both the treatment and the overall experience of combining care with travel	Combination of affordable pricing, high-quality care, and family visit influenced the decision

Source: Author, Interviews during January – February 2025, At Bali Indonesia

Table 2. Literature review article on push and pull factor dental tourism

Authors	Journals and years	Titles of the studies	Research findings
Brescia et al ²¹	Health Services Management Research (2025)	Bibliometric analysis and trends related to dental tourism: qualitative, social, economic and ethical implications	A bibliometric analysis highlighting the driving and pulling factors in dental tourism, with a focus on social, economic, and cultural factors influencing patient behavior. Emphasizes the need for bilateral agreements to ensure quality care.
Mucaj ²²	Deleted Journal (2024)	Exploring medical and dental tourism: opportunities, challenges, and global impact on healthcare	Explores the driving factors in medical and dental tourism, emphasizing lower treatment costs, advanced procedures, and ethical issues. Highlights challenges and opportunities in global dental tourism.
Mansueto et al ²³	Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Studies (2024)	Exploring push and pull factors in tourism: understanding foreign visitors' motivations in Siquijor Island	Identifies the push and pull factors in foreign tourist motivations, focusing on self-enrichment and cultural engagement, and emphasizes the importance of a holistic experience in attracting tourists.
Sukma ²⁴	Tourism and Hospitality Research (2024)	Medical tourism in central Java: Influences of image and promotion	The role of destination image and promotion in enhancing customer satisfaction and revisit intentions in medical tourism in Central Java. Product quality had a less direct impact on revisit intentions.
Dwiastuti, Ratih ²⁵	International Journal of Allied Medical Sciences and Clinical Research (2024)	Dental tourism as a health tourism business opportunity in Bali	Identifies the driving factors for dental tourism in Bali, including lower costs and better quality of services, but highlights a lack of promotion and the need for legal revisions to improve Bali's appeal as a dental tourism destination.
Chang, Ayob ²⁶	International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences (2024)	Medical tourism travel motivations: the push and pull driving forces	Analyzes the push and pull factors in medical tourism post-pandemic, including economic efficiency, reduced waiting times, attractive locations, and cutting-edge technology. These factors are relevant for dental tourism in Indonesia.
Banerjee et al ²⁷	Journal of Advances in Internal Medicine (2024)	Medical tourism: medical dream or nightmare?	Mentions dental procedures as one of the most sought-after treatments for medical tourists, with a focus on cost, care quality, and accessibility, along with risks associated with medical travel.
Wang et al ²⁸	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events (2024)	Attracting tourists to Indonesia: how SEZs and visa-free policies influence international arrivals	Examines how special economic zone policies and visa-free policies impact tourist arrivals in Indonesia, with modest positive effects from SEZ and negative effects from visa-free policies on arrivals.
Bentley ²⁹	Deleted Journal (2024)	Medical tourism management	Discusses management strategies in medical tourism, focusing on strategic planning, collaboration between healthcare providers and tourism stakeholders, and quality assurance mechanisms, relevant for dental tourism as well.
Singh et al ³⁰	Advances in Electronic Government, Digital Divide, and Regional Development Book Series (2024)	Medical tourism and health gateways in international health market places	Explores how medical tourism, including dental services, is transforming patient mobility across global healthcare, emphasizing sustainability, social responsibility, and the factors driving patients to seek healthcare abroad.