

An analysis of dental tourists' motivations for visiting Kvarner

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to determine the motives of tourists who choose to visit Kvarner region for its dental tourism offer. Authors used a structured questionnaire prepared according to research of Jaapar et al. (2017), which was distributed both physically in dental clinics, as well as online through e-mail and social networks. Data was collected in the period of end of July until October 2025. A total of 136 correctly filled questionnaires were collected. The data was analyzed with SPSS 21.0, and for data analysis descriptive statistics was used. Findings indicate Kvarner being recognized as a dental tourism destination, since dental tourists visit it motivated primarily by its Dental Care Quality, Dental Care Information access, Cultural Similarity and Cost savings. Supporting services have proven to be the weakest motivating factor. Taking into account the lack of research of this topic, and in Kvarner in particular, these findings can be used by both dental service providers and destination management in the process of improving current dental tourist offer and achieving greater competitiveness on the (dental) tourist market. Due to a small statistical sample it is advised to continue collecting data to get a clearer insight into the motives of dental tourists who visit Kvarner.

Keywords: dental tourism, dental tourists, motives, Kvarner

1. Introduction

Over the years medical tourism as a specific form of tourism offer has been registering a rapid and strong development (Alkier et al., 2021), which is confirmed by the latest findings published by Fortune Business Insights (2025) stating that: 1) in 2024 global medical tourism market was estimated at 31.23 billion USD, and 2) that in 2025 it will achieve growth from 38,20 billion USD to 162,80 billion USD in 2032 (CAGR 23,0% in the forecasted period). According to the latest data published by United Nations World Tourism Organization, Europe as the largest destination region participated the most in the world tourist turnover (747 million of international tourist arrivals (UNWTO, 2025), as well as in medical tourism flows (36.41% in 2024) (Fortune Business Insights, 2025). As visible, world destinations are actively developing their medical tourist offer and actively investing in promotion in order to profile themselves as healthy destinations (Alkier et al., 2021; Lubowiecki-Vikuk & Dryglas, 2019; Barać Miftarević, 2022). Republic of Croatia has been developing its medical tourism offer over the years (Barać Miftarević, 2022; Alkier et al., 2021; Gredičak & Demonja, 2020; Kesar & Rimac, 2011; Najdanović & Palić, 2023), however, very little research has so far been focused on dental tourism. Alkier et al. emphasize in their research that there is a growing number of dental clinics in Croatia, and especially near the state borders that are increasingly focusing on dental tourism offer development by investing in the improvement of quality and diversity of their dental services, and online promotion activities. They offer them according to the cheaper prices, this way successfully attracting tourists from various, but in particularly neighboring countries like Germany, Slovenia, Austria and Italy (Alkier et al., 2024). Kvarner is a Croatian region that is very attractive to tourists. Over the years it has been actively developing its medical tourism offer, with a particular accent to dental tourism in the last ten years. Due to affordable prices and high-quality dental services, not just Kvarner, but other Croatian regions as well are registering growth of this tourist offer (Tomak, 2021). Despite the growing developmental trend, up until now little research has been focused on determining attitudes of dental tourists in Croatia, while research focused on Kvarner region is non-existent. The purpose of research is to determine what are the motives that stimulate tourists to visit Kvarner for its dental tourist offer. The structure of this paper is as follows: after the introduction, authors will present the theoretical considerations

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of loyalty and satisfaction of dental tourists, methodology, results of the empirical findings, and discussion and conclusion.

2. Theoretical considerations of motivation of dental tourists

Creating a tourist offer tailored to the specific demands, needs and desires of tourists and their motives for travel was a rarity in the tourism market in the past due to the significant dominance of the classic sun-sea-sand offer. Today that is not the case which is witnessed by many changes that were registered over the years. Accent is paid to the fast changes in qualitative trends, respectively traditional tourism offers, although still dominant, has been significantly transformed into new forms of tourism called Specific forms of tourism, influenced by the changes in tourist preferences, tourism industry, information and communication technology, as well as tourism management and tourism policies. More significant attention is paid on undertaking marketing activities. Development of specific forms of tourism, differentiation of the offer as well as market segmentation enabled for destinations to enter the tourist market in an easier manner (Živković & Brdar, 2018; Ivanović et al., 2016; Alkier Radnić, 2003, 231). In line with the increasingly intense changes, the World Tourism Organization recommends that tourist destinations monitor tourist behavior and, in accordance with their attitudes and preferences, develop and offer tourist products and services that will satisfy their needs. This will ultimately enable destinations to differentiate more successfully in the tourism market and achieve competitive advantages (Živković & Brdar, 2018; WTO, 1998). Further attention needs to be paid to determining the motives of tourists when choosing their holiday destination, and how satisfied they are with their experiences.

Tourist motivation is increasingly complex today, encompassing a growing number of reasons for travel beyond the classic offer of beach tourism, and health improvement is one of them. As such, it is extremely important in deciding about choosing a holiday destination and is significantly related to the image of a tourist destination that individuals form before and after visiting the destination (Birín, 2017). Socioeconomic factors that can be considered as motives that have significantly contributed to the increase in the number of dental tourist trips are: 1) the cost of dental services in one's own country being too high; 2) the inability to quickly access dental services; 3) people's interest in using dental services elsewhere; 4) the cost of dental services is more expensive compared to the cost of traveling to another destination; and 5) the possibility of obtaining information via the Internet about the offer of dental services, regulations on their provision, service prices, waiting times, and adherence to standards related to the quality of dental services (Dwiasuti & Ratih, 2025; Akbar et al., 2020; Trohel et al., 2016). Following, the results of selected research studies will be presented, showing the most relevant motives of tourists for traveling abroad for dental services. The research of Jaapar et al. (2017) presents the attitudes of tourists who visited Malaysia due to dental services. Findings show that they were motivated mostly by Dental Care Quality (AM=4.39), dental care information access (AM=3.87) and Cost-savings (AM=3.78). Supporting services (AM=3.59) were marked as a moderate motivator, while cultural similarity (AM=3.18) has proven to be the least relevant. Within the Dental Care Quality construct all the elements (qualified and competent dental professionals, high quality/standard of dental care, dental clinic with certification/accreditation scheme, use of high technology for dental care, personalized care, availability of several dental specialist services under one dental clinic and ease of payment via insurance/debit/credit card) were marked above 4.00, indicating its strong relevance in the decision-making process of dental tourists. Access to information about the dental care services is also relevant for them since all the elements (good reviews by others via internet/media, convenient communication with dental providers via internet/telephone, recommendation from relatives/friends, and availability of information on dental clinics offering dental care) were marked just a bit below 4.00, still indicating strong relevance. In terms of Cost-savings, affordable dental care, convenient location of dental clinic and reasonable cost for quality accommodation have proven to be strong motivators, while less interest was shown for using attractive travel/tourism packages and opportunity to visit other tourist attractions. Within supporting services, excellent transport service/connectivity and wide choices of accommodation were the stronger motivators, while less interest was expressed in the availability of language interpreters and good services provided by MHTC. In terms of cultural similarity, only communication using the language that dental tourists were familiar with, and vicinity of their home country has proven to be the most relevant, which was not the case with family and relatives being in a destination, availability of amenities for religious practices and easy availability of food choices. Carmagnola et al. (2012) conducted empirical research on Italian tourists who used dental services abroad. Their main motives for traveling abroad were cheaper price of dental services, as well as possibility of getting full rehabilitation within a one-week period after their dental work. Besides cheaper price of dental services, the reasons for searching dental services abroad were previous negative experiences with Italian dental service providers (i.e. single prosthetic session lasting up to 6 hours). After using dental services abroad, dental tourists expressed speed of service provision, as well as interaction with the surroundings and the dental staff (their kindness, humane approach, interest in their further treatment procedure, sense of ease, etc.) as positive motivators. In the research of Kotollaku (2024) as motivators for visiting Albania dental tourists expressed good quality of dental services provided by professionals, implementation of high-quality technology, low prices, warranty for dental services, flexibility in arranging the appointment, short period of waiting for the treatment, and visiting a new destination. Cuamea et al. (2017) did a research in Tijuana, Mexico and determined five crucial factors influencing the decision-making process of dental tourists: 1) "Quality-Price Factor" (cleanliness of the clinic, services provided by staff of the clinic, quality perceived by the patients, the price of separate treatments, the treatment follow-up and the speed of service); 2) "Facilities and Technology Factor" (the location of the clinic in the city, physical appearance of facilities (Facade), technology used for dental procedures and swiftness of service); 3) "Length of Time and Price of Treatments

Factor" (number of visits required for each treatment, and the total cost of treatment); 4) "Credit Factor" (enabling dental tourists to make partial payments during each visit); and 5) "Urban Image Factor" (referred to driving conditions, like signs, traffic density, conditions of street). Keleş et al. (2026) determined that dental tourist's motives for visiting Turkey were affordability of dental treatments, implementation of good quality technology, dentists' experience, short time for providing dental treatments, easy arrangement of dental appointments, and low costs for travel and accommodation. Lower motivation was registered for getting dental treatments unavailable in the home country of dental tourists, tourist attractions, proximity to home country, and cultural and religious affinity. Findings of Filippi et al. (2017) show similar results as previously mentioned, respectively, in terms of motives consider the ratio of price and benefits experienced from dental services, competence of dental professionals, friendliness of the staff, quality of consultation, no reimbursement respectively more favorable treatments, modern equipment for providing dental services, short waiting time for making an appointment, perception of staff in dental clinic as reliable and trustful, and short waiting times in the waiting room.

As visible from previous findings, determining motives through empirical research is significant. Findings like these enable the following:

- determining what are the exact most relevant drivers of dental tourism demand to prevent any type of decisions being made purely on assumptions (Chawla, 2025);
- dental tourists need to be divided into segments to determine their profiles as well as motives since not everybody value dental tourism offer elements in the same manner (Jaapar et al., 2017; Živković & Brdar, 2018);
- determining what are the attribute of dental tourist offers in clinics, and in a destination in general that tourists consider in their decision-making process to plan (dental) tourist offer (Cuamea et al., 2017);
- enabling easier and faster access to dental services through establishment of a planning system which will reduce their time of waiting (Prastiwi et al., 2025);
- sense of safety represents one of the most relevant factors in a decision-making process of tourists when choosing their destination and going on a holiday. It is necessary to ensure that dental tourists feel safe during the process of dental treatment, during their stay in a destination, and post-treatment, respectively after returning home (Doughty et al., 2024);
- satisfaction determinants are closely connected with motives and need to be measured due to their positive experience of dental tourist's experience, loyalty in the future and interest in positive Word-of-Mouth (Lwin et al., 2021);
- lower prices of dental services also represent one of the leading motives for dental tourists who decide to travel abroad. However, lower prices do not mean lower quality services. Dental service providers focus on offering cheaper high-quality dental services, this way more easily attracting tourists. This value needs to be communicated properly without providing false hopes (Chawla, 2025);
- findings from tracking motives can provide tourism policymakers with valuable insights into better understanding the reasons why people choose to travel abroad for dental services, as well as for forming guidelines for establishing better regulations and finding ways to address ethical and sustainable challenges (Alkier Tomić et al., 2025).

3. Methodology

The questionnaire was adapted from the study of Jaapar et al. (2017). Its original instrument contained 2 constructs; however, the satisfaction construct containing 31 items was removed for the purposes of this study. The final version included a motivation construct with 25 items. Questions were focused on determining the sociodemographic structure of dental tourists, their preferences in terms of company during their travel, main purpose of visiting Kvarner, used sources of information about dental care, type of dental care they received during their stay, and their motives for visiting Kvarner (in terms of dental services). A 5-point Likert scale was used for determining the motives (1-least relevant to 5-most relevant), while others were multiple choice questions. A purposive sampling technique was implemented, and collection of data was conducted from the end of July until October 2025. The distribution of the questionnaire was two-fold: a) physically at the reception desks of dental clinics, and 2) online through Google docs form. A total of 136 respondents participated willingly in this research. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N
.835	.789	25

Source: Authors' research

The 25-item scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .835$), exceeding the recommended threshold of .70 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

4. Empirical findings

In this chapter authors will present the results of empirical research. The following table presents demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 2. Demographic structure of respondents

	Frequency (N = 136)	
	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	75	55.1
Male	61	44.9
<i>Age</i>		
Lower middle-aged (31-45)	53	39.0
Upper middle-aged (46-59)	44	32.4
Young adult (18-30)	30	22.1
Seniors (60+)	9	6.6
<i>Country of origin</i>		
Slovenia	48	35.3
Croatia	25	18.4
Germany	22	16.2
Austria	22	16.2
Italy	19	14.0

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 21.0

An insight into the sociodemographic characteristics of dental tourists indicates that most of the respondents are female (55.1%), while 44.9% are male. According to the age group, 39% of the respondents belong to the age group 31-45, followed by the age groups 46-59 (32.4%), 18-30 (22.1%), and 60+ (6.6%). According to the country of origin, most of the respondents, 35.3% are from Slovenia, followed by Croatia (18.4%), Germany (16.2%), Austria (16.2%) and Italy (14.0%).

Table 3. Travel company during a journey

	Frequency (N = 136)	
	N	%
With spouse only	72	52.9
Alone	29	21.3
With family/relatives	17	12.5
With friends	13	9.6
With business associate	2	1.5
With children only	2	1.5
Others	1	0.7

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 21.0

When choosing their travel company, the respondents prefer to travel mostly with their spouses (52.9%), alone (21.3%), with family/relatives (12.5%), friends (9.6%), business associates (1.5%), and their children (1.5%). Only 0.7% of the respondents choose other options.

Table 4. Main purpose of visit

	Frequency (N = 136)	
	N	%
Dental care	125	91.9
Holiday	6	4.4
Business	3	2.2
Conferences	1	0.7
Visiting friends and relatives	1	0.7

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 21.0

In terms of the respondent's main purpose of visit, 91.9% of them tend to visit Kvarner primarily for using dental care services, 4.4% due to holiday, 2.2% for business, 0.7% for conferences, and 0.7% for visiting friends and relatives.

Table 5. Source of information about dental care

	Frequency (N = 136)	
	N	%
Internet	123	90.4
Friends/relatives visited Kvarner	57	41.9
Friends/relatives living in Kvarner	44	32.4
Health facilitator	13	9.6
Referred by professionals	11	8.1

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 21.0
Possibility of choosing multiple answers

When searching information about dental care in Kvarner, most of the respondents (90,4%) rely mostly on internet, 41,9%, followed by the recommendations of friends and relatives who visited Kvarner (41,9%), friends and relatives who live in Kvarner (32,4%). Lowest result was recorded for health facilitators (9,6%) and references by professionals (8,1%).

Table 6. Type of dental care received

	Frequency (N = 136)	
	N	%
Examination	76	55.9
Simple filling	67	49.3
Consultation	56	41.2
Scaling and polishing	38	27.9
Teeth whitening	36	26.5
Implant	31	22.8
Orthodontics	28	20.6
Root canal treatment	23	16.9
Oral surgery	20	14.7
Other	15	11
Crown/bridge/veneer	13	9.6
Gum surgery	9	6.6
Dentures	5	3.7

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 21.0
Possibility of choosing multiple answers

During their stay in Kvarner dental tourists consulted dental professionals due to having an examination (55.9%), simple fillings (49.3%), consultation about future procedures (41.2%), scaling and polishing (27.9%), and teeth whitening (26.5%). A bit lower result was registered for having Implants (22.8%), using Orthodontics services (20.6%), having Root canal treatment (16.9%), and Oral surgery services (14.7%). Lowest result was registered for using other services (11%), having Crowns/bridges/veneers (9.6%), Gum surgery (6.6%), and Dentures (3.7%).

Table 7. Motives of dental tourists for visiting Kvarner

Dental care information access	AM	SD
Availability of information on dental clinics offering dental care	4.85	0.355
Convenient communication with dental providers via Internet/telephone	4.71	0.485
Recommendation from relatives/friends	4.24	1.200
Good reviews by others via Internet/media	3.90	1.282
Average mark dental care information access	4.43	0.494
Dental care quality	AM	SD
High quality standard of dental care	4.93	0.262
Personalized care	4.93	0.262
Qualified and competent dental professionals	4.91	0.285
Dental clinic with certification/accreditation scheme	4.71	0.473
Use of high technology for dental care	4.22	.875
Ease of payment via insurance/debit/credit card	4.04	1.043
Availability of several dental specialist services under one dental clinic	3.96	1.238
Average mark dental care quality	4.53	0.398
Cost savings	AM	SD
Affordable dental care	4.97	0.170
Convenient location of dental clinic	4.87	0.400
Reasonable cost for quality accommodation	2.70	1.657
Opportunity to visit other tourist attractions	2.18	1.441
Attractive travel/tourism package	2.14	1.340
Average mark cost savings	3.37	0.765

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 21.0

Table 7. Continued

Cultural similarity	AM	SD
Communication using the language that I am familiar with.	4.80	.718
Not far from the tourists' country	4.58	.907
Easy availability of appropriate food choices	3.54	1.419
Family/relatives/friends are here	2.77	1.563
Availability of amenities for religious practices	2.54	1.664
Average mark cultural similarity	3.64	0.842
Supporting services	AM	SD
Excellent transport service/connectivity	4.91	.310
Good services provided by Kvarner Cluster of Health Tourism	3.58	1.221
Wide choices of accommodation	2.79	1.697
Availability of language interpreter	1.76	1.541
Average mark supporting services	3.26	0.869

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 21.0

Data in the previous table presents the motives of dental tourists when visiting Kvarner. Findings indicate that when choosing Kvarner for dental services, tourists are motivated mostly by Dental Care Quality (AM=4.53) and Dental Care Information Access (AM=4.43) and Cultural Similarity (AM=3.64). Cost Savings (AM=3.37) and Supporting Services (AM=3.26) have proven to be the least relevant motivators when choosing Kvarner as a dental tourist destination.

5. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study was to determine motives of tourists who choose to visit Kvarner for its dental services and settle the basis for future research. Even though dental tourism is experiencing strong growth and development worldwide, it remains significantly unexplored within the medical tourism segment, and especially in Croatia and Kvarner. Empirical findings of this study indicate quite strongly that Kvarner has been recognized as a destination of dental tourism, considering that 91.9% of the respondents stated that they visited Kvarner primarily motivated by dental services. In their decision-making process when choosing Kvarner they rely on information on the internet, as well as Word-of-Mouth from friends and relatives who visited, or who live in Kvarner. The results presenting the motives show that they are motivated by *Dental Care Quality* which is in accordance with the results of studies of Jaapar et al. (2017) and Lubowiecki-Vikuk (2018). Cuamea et al. (2017) determined Quality-Price and Facilities and Technology being a strong motivator. Dental tourist destinations (like Hungary) are focused significantly on providing high quality dental education to their students. This, accompanied with use of high-quality materials, ensuring quality through implementation of ISO standards, as well as positive experiences and high level of satisfaction of dental tourists enable them to take a competitive position on the dental tourism market (Kovacs et al. (2013). In Kvarner region, the Faculty of Dental Medicine, University of Rijeka is educating excellent personnel in accordance with the latest trends. The recognition of its quality is supported by the fact that in 2024 its dental medicine study program received 232 applications for 30 enrollment spots, and 44 high school graduates have marked it as their first choice (Šestan Kučić, 2024). For Kvarner region to maintain its competitive position, it is necessary to consider ways of talent retention in the future to maintain the level of quality of its dental care services. *Dental Care Information access* has also proven to be relevant motivator which is in accordance with Jaapar et al. (2017) and Peručić (2019) indicating that dental service providers will need to continue focusing on provision of up-to-date and reliable information about dental tourist offer as well as testimonials given by dental tourists, considering its relevance in decision-making process. *Cultural similarity* has also proven to be relevant in our study, which is not in accordance with the study of Jaapar et al. (2017) where it was evaluated as the least relevant motivator when observing average mark. A bit deeper insight indicates that most relevant motivators were easier communication during dental tourist's stay in a destination (Gheorghe et al., 2017; Jaapar et al., 2017) and as well as due to the vicinity of their country of origin (Jaapar et al., 2017). Easy availability of appropriate food choices was evaluated slightly higher in our study which is not in accordance with Jaapar et al. (2017). Vicinity of family/relatives/friends and amenities for religious practices have proven to be the least relevant which is in accordance with Jaapar et al. (2017). Dental service providers will have to focus in the future on additional improvements in their foreign language skills (if necessary) to ensure their effortless communication with dental tourists. This will also make them feel welcome and familiar with the dental clinic/office and the destination. The results for *cost savings* indicate affordability of dental care services and convenient location of dental clinic to be relevant motives which is in accordance with findings of Jaapar et al. (2017), Peručić (2019), Lubowiecki-Vikuk (2018) and Gheorghe et al. (2017). However, results for reasonable cost for quality accommodation, opportunity to visit other tourist attractions, and using an attractive travel/tourism package have proven to be less motivating in relation to the Malaysian dental tourists (Jaapar et al. (2017). Dental service providers will need to continue forming prices that will ensure them profit, while at the same time being acceptable for patients. This will contribute towards their satisfaction and loyalty. Supporting services have proven to be moderately relevant motivator in the decision-making process of dental tourists. High motivation was registered for excellent transport service/connectivity and well as good services provided by Kvarner Cluster of Health Tourism which is in accordance with Jaapar et al. (2017). Wide choices of accommodation and availability of language interpreter have proven to be less motivating which is not in accordance with Jaapar et al. (2017). Dental service providers will need to invest in their quality and diversity to make

dental tourists stay more convenient, considering that according to Alkier et al (2024) supporting services influence the satisfaction of dental tourists, and their revisit intention.

Considering the significant lack of research focused on dental tourism at the global level, as well as its poor research at the level of the Kvarner region, it can be justified to say that this research is justified. In addition to contributing to theory, the findings and discussions presented in the paper can be of significant benefit to both dental service providers and tourist destination management. However, this study has also some limitations due to the sample size, which is why it is necessary to continue monitoring what are the motives that stimulate dental tourists to visit Kvarner. Based on the findings like these they will be able to develop better marketing strategies focused on attracting new and preserving loyal dental tourists (Alkier et al (2024)).

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