



# Medical Tourists' Future Destination Choice

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## Abstract

Medical tourism has become an important sector that contributed to country's development economically. In line with this notion, this study proposed to explore how the image of a destination could influence medical tourists in choosing a destination as their future medical and tourism destination choice. Scholars argued that destination image had a significant relationship with behavioral intentions. Further, destination image influence not only the decision-making process but also conditions after-decision-making behaviors of tourists. In this study context, the future destination choice behavior referred to the intention to revisit and to spread the positive word-of-mouth. Inbound medical tourists from private hospitals in Malaysia will be approached quantitatively by survey questionnaires. This study will contribute to an understanding of the significant factors influencing medical tourists' intention for future destination choice.

Keywords: destination image; destination choice; revisit intention; word-of-mouth

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## 1.0 Introduction

Since the 19th century, the advent of medical tourism has created the scenario of people traveling to another destination for the purpose of healing and relaxation (Lee, Han, & Lockyer, 2012). Today, medical tourism or the act of traveling overseas for treatment and care has been trending in both the healthcare and tourism industries (Enderwick & Nagar, 2011; Yu & Ko, 2012). This market is emerging and rapidly becoming one of the world's fastest developing industries growing approximately at 30% a year (Mohamad, Omar, & Haron, 2012). Based on this background, the global industry is expected to generate revenue growth of US \$ 40 billion with more than 780 million tourists scattered across 96 countries (Yeoh, Othman, & Ahmad, 2013).

Many countries are now strategic for the development of their economy and embrace a broader concept of medical tourism (Mohamad et al., 2012; Musa, Thirumoorthi, & Doshi, 2012; Mohamad & Jamil, 2012). Among the most famous medical tourism destination countries, Asian countries attract more tourists because they are less expensive compared to other parts of the region as the US or European countries. Therefore, they get required medical attention, entertainment, and relaxation at the same time. It would be more costly in their country or other countries of the world (Sultana, Haque, Momen, & Yasmin, 2014). Thus, successful Asian countries like Malaysia, Thailand, India, and Singapore are remarkable in this medical tourism industry.

In the increasingly competitive medical tourism market, the primary concerns for destination marketers are to attract more international medical tourists. The marketers also need to motivate them to revisit the destinations and pass on the positive word-of-mouth to others for further medical treatment and leisure vacations (Han, 2013). According to Chiu, Hsu, Lai, and Chang (2012), keeping the existing customers is about five times more profitable than attracting new customers as increased customer retention is likely to improve any business's profitability. Thus, in the medical tourism market, recognizing vital factors in medical tourists' repurchase decision-making processes and understanding their specific role are important for any destination country. Undoubtedly, tourists' perceptions over destination image are vital for successful destination marketing (Ramseook-Munhurrin, Seebaluck, & Naidoo, 2015).

The literature on travel and tourism disclosed an abundance of studies on destination image however its relationship with the future destination choice has not been thoroughly investigated in medical tourism destination. Based on the above setting, it is crucial to focus on examining existing medical tourists' future behavior exhibited through their intention to revisit and recommendation through word-of-mouth (WOM). Consequently, this study proposed to investigate the relationship between destination image and future destination choice. Therefore, literature about destination image and future destination choice will be reviewed, and propositions of the study will be proposed

## 2.0 Literature Review

In tourism marketing literature, the destination image is an important concept that should be developed through marketing research. Previously, destination image is defined as a mental

perception held by travelers or the whole collection of impressions of a particular destination (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Jamaludin, Johari, Aziz, Kayat, & Yusof, 2012). It is also an attitudinal notion of the plural of ideas, impressions, and feelings that a traveler holds off a destination (Li, Cai, Lehto, & Huang, 2010). Tapachai and Waryszak (2000) defined destination image as the characteristics of a destination that can influence tourists in the selection of destinations. However, recent definition interpreted by tourists depending on their travel itinerary, cultural background, the purpose of visit, educational level and past travel experience (Mohamad, Abdullah, & Mokhlis, 2012). These definitions showed that destination image plays a significant role in the success of travelers' destinations. It promotes a strong link with the choices of tourist (Milman & Pizam, 1995). Tourists will end up choosing the destinations with a good image in their minds rather than those with bad ones. Usually, these images appear when the tourists' perceptions of the destination's attributes have been lit up by some means of information. Due to this, the destination image has to be promoted well to create awareness about the factors that will provoke positive or negative feelings in consumers.

According to Keller (2003), a destination image is a perception that can be reflected in the customers' memories. For example, a grand festival having social and cultural meaning holds a powerful attraction and appeal for visitors who come over, and this can lead to a major significance in creating or enhancing an image for the destination. According to several researchers (Clemes, Gan, & Ren, 2011; Wu, & Chan, 2011) an image is measured by the reputation and prestige of the destination and is also made comparison with other competitors. Empirical evidence supports the notion that tourism attraction, have a substantial impact on destination image (Bosnjak, 2010; Zhou, 2005). The tourism attractions as defined by Hall & James (2011) are the specific features of tourism destination attributes such as climate, landscape features, and activities at the destinations. Hu, Y. & Ritchie (1993) study on tourism destination attractiveness had proposed five destination attributes, namely geographical factors, socio-cultural factors, natural attributes, physical attributes and ancillary attributes. In the structural model, the complex image of a destination has been identified with the antecedents such as quality, price, value, and satisfaction. It's certain that complex image of a destination is the most realistic image because it's formed by the exact reality performed by the destination and perceived by the tourists (Özdemir & Şimşek, 2015).

In medical tourism context, if the market practitioners want to persuade medical tourists to visit a country or hospital, they need to develop a good image through medical health care facilities. A good image of medical health care must provide advanced technology and equipment, a high international standard of treatment and high performance of medical experts so that they would visit that provider as the present and future destination. It means that the medical tourism providers must be ready for medical tourists or travelers for their facilities in treatment, healthcare, and hospitality (Chomvilailuk & Srisomyong, 2015). Even though Jadhav et al., (2014) stated that patients combining medical procedures with a sunny retreat are uncommon in reality, Langvinienė (2014) however suggested to include entertainment and leisure tourism services on top of health programs to create better destination image. It will help to ensure the sustainable growth of medical tourism service

sector. Balakrishnan, Nekhili, and Lewis (2011) point out that the medical tourist's interpretation about the destination attractiveness, particularly for hospital facilities, can have an impact on the destination image. Therefore, if the medical tourist perceived that they can receive their demand or need for the medical facilities provided by the medical service provider, it can be expected that it would create a positive or good destination image and they would select that provider to be their medical tourism destination in the future (Chomvilailuk & Srisomyong, 2015). Hence, the following proposition is postulated:-

Proposition 1: Medical tourism destination image is manifested by several underlying dimensions of tourism destination attractions.

Proposition 2: Medical tourism destination image is manifested by several underlying dimensions of medical healthcare attractions.

## **2.2 Future Destination Choice**

Destination choice has always been one of the favorite research topics in academic tourism field (Crompton, 1992; Keating & Kriz, 2008; Ahn, Ekinci & Li, 2013). It is crucial importance to destination marketing organizations. Choice according to Buhalis (2000) is the change in the act while, by definition, destination choice is a tourist's decision on which destination to travel from multiple alternatives. Further supported by Hsu, Tsai, and Wu (2009), they conceptualized destination choice as a tourist's selection of a destination from a set of alternatives. It involves several steps from need recognition, information search, evaluation and comparison of products, and then to final purchase decision (Liu, 2014) affected by various factors (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Um & Crompton, 1990).

According to the travel destination choice literature and related models, the concept of push and pull factors is the most profound travel motivation model. This concept is related to the behavior of every tourist in selecting a destination for their medical treatment (Uysal & Hagan, 1993). The pushing factors are mainly their intention or dream for travel whereas the pulling factor is primarily the actual choice of the place itself (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Pull factors includes the tangible and intangible factors of a particular destination that pulls. In another word, attracts people to realize the needs of a particular travel experience once the decision to travel is made (Uysal & Hagan, 1993; Lam & Hsu, 2006).

Many of the models on choices for tourism destination reveal that the previous experiences whether good, bad or satisfactory can be a determining factor in making future choices for a destination. Usually, these experiences will be shared in which people can discuss their experiences and advice others about it. This word-of-mouth act will influence others' choices and also the future choices made by those who have experienced the places themselves (Chon, 1991; Mansfeld, 1992; Yasvari, Ghassemi, & Rahrovy, 2012). Previous research on tourism destination choice has used behavioral intentions as a measure of future destination choice (Ahmad, Jamaluddin, Alias, & Jailil, 2013). Behavioral intention is one of the most important factors in sustaining the tourism products. The importance has brought in greater interests among researchers to include determinants such as positive mouth-to-mouth feedback that bring to higher interest for future choice on a particular destination. For instance, George and George (2004) pointed out that behavioral intention proves the

frequency of visitors deciding to revisit the destination in the future. When they have a positive experience in one visit, it can bring to higher chances of future visits to the same place. In line with the previous researchers, the current study used intentions to revisit the destination and spreading positive words of mouth to represent future destination choice. Ahmad et al. (2013) agreed that behavioral intention proves the frequency of visitors deciding to revisit the destination in the future as well as willingness to spread positive comments and to recommend the destination to others. Kuenzel and Katsaris (2009) summarize post-visit behavior into two-dimension namely, intention to return (purchase intention/loyalty) and recommendation through word-of-mouth (WOM). Therefore, the following proposition proposed:

Proposition 3: Future destination choice is exhibited by two underlying dimensions of revisit intention and word-of-mouth recommendation

### **2.3 Destination Image and Future Destination Choice**

The perception tourists can have on the attractions at a destination will impact their choices in two ways; firstly through direct and indirect influences on the overall image. It can also be affected by other variables, for example, the level of satisfaction they obtain during their visit (Kitapci, Akdogan, & Dortyol, 2014). Overall satisfaction level of their trip to the destination will create a new overall image of the destination (Chon, 1991). Hence, can impact the tourists' future decision on destination selection or even the decision to return to that destination. It may also affect destination ideas and suggestions that the tourists will give to their friends and fellow citizens. The tourists' new perceptions of a destination's essential attributes can also directly impact their future destination choices. It is affirmed that there is a positive relationship between destination image and future attitudes. There is an increased possibility for travelers who have a positive image of the destination to revisit and recommend the destination to others (Jalilvand et al., 2012). Identically Bigne, Sanchez, and Sanchez (2001) have experimentally tested the relationship between destination image and revisit intention. They found a positive correlation between this two. The more favorable the destination image held by a traveler, the quicker the traveler would return (Bigne et al., 2001; Li, Harrill, Uysal, Burnett & Zhan, 2010). Further supported by Mohamad et al. (2012), they suggested that foreign tourists are more willing to spread positive recommendations and undertake repeat visitations in future when they perceived favorable destination image. The same authors further confirmed that idea by concluding positive image of the tourist destination can bring to the tourists' level of satisfaction. Therefore, enhancing their intention to return to the same place in the future, on top of their willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth comments, and recommend the destination to others around them.

The research on the non-visitors, first timers and repetitive visitors conducted by Fakeye and Crompton (1991) shows that the image developed into each and every one will be determined by the time they had spent in a particular place. It was found that the differences occur in the first visits bringing to repeat visits. Hunt (1975) and Pearce (1982) studies clarified the existence of the positive relationship between destination image and behavioral intention. Tasci and Gartner (2007) demonstrate destination image as an independent

variable that has an influence on behavioral intention. The finding is parallel to the study done by (Bigne et al., 2001). They found that tourism image is a direct antecedent of satisfaction, perceived quality, intention to return and willingness to recommend the destination. Tourist's satisfaction resulting from positive destination image will influence tourist behavior intentions (Chi & Qu, 2008; Kitapci et al., 2014). Furthermore, Chen and Tsai (2007) proposed that destination image has both direct and indirect effects towards behavioral intentions. Consequently, perceived attractiveness, rather than overall satisfaction, is the antecedent of revisit intention (Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006).

According to Govers, Go and Kumar (2007) the success of marketing communications strategies, may significantly influence tourist's travel behavior. Tourism destinations with pleasant experience have a major effect on the development of positive images for the tourists. Tourist's positive experiences of service, products, and other resources provided by tourism destinations could produce repeat visits as well as positive WOM effects to others. Satisfied tourists with new perceived image of a destination are more likely to return to the same destination and are more willing to share their positive traveling experience with their friends and relatives (Jalilvand, Ebrahimi, & Samiei, 2013). Based on the above arguments, we propose the following:

Proposition 4: Destination Image leads to future destination choice

Proposition 4a: Destination Image will positively and significantly influence revisit intention

Proposition 4b: Destination Image will positively and significantly influence WOM recommendation

Proposition 5: The more favorable the destination image, the more positive future destination choice

### **3.0 Methodology**

The principal objective of the study is to measure how the image of a destination gave influence on the future destination choice from the point of view of inbound medical tourists in Malaysia. Thus, a self-administered questionnaire will be given to international medical tourists getting treatment in Malaysia to collect the required primary data. Major hubs for medical tourism destination in Malaysia include Penang, Malacca, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, data will be collected from the private hospitals registered with Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) from these four localities. Respondents will be asked to assess each statement on some items bounded at each end by one of two bipolar meaning words, strongly disagree and strongly agree with the rating scale from 1 to 5. The survey questionnaire had three major sections (description of the research, questions relating to study variables, and questions to collect demographic information). Specifically, the questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part measure respondent's perceptions of destination image using measurement adopted from Echtner (1991). The second part will be designed and adapted from Lin (2006) and Han (2013) to gather information about respondents' future destination choice. While the final part gather respondent's demographic information, which is important to provide insights related to their background and characteristics. Content validity will be measured through factor analysis. Structural Equation

Modelling (SEM) will use to clarify the importance of constructs and overall relationships between and among the variables and constructs.

This study has some limitations that need to be taken into account when considering the study findings. As this study needs to collaborate with private hospitals in Malaysia, data needed from respondents might be confidential, and researcher needs to deal with the ethical concern. Due to this reason, consent letters from Ministry of Health, Ministry of Tourism and Malaysia Healthcare and Travel Council are needed to get participation from respective hospitals. For cost-effective, targeted hospitals will be from four main states – Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang and Malacca, which already represented more than 70% of the total hospitals that are registered under and approved as participating medical providers under Malaysia Healthcare and Travel Council (MHTC).

This proposed study is conducted with the purpose of identifying relationships between international medical tourists' evaluations of Malaysia's destination image and their future destination choice. The results of this study will underline that destination marketers must take particular consideration of the image factor as this will affect tourists' future destination choice. Interestingly, the study will uncover the dimensions of Malaysia's destination image that are manifested by underlying factors of tourism destination attractions and medical healthcare attractions. From a practical standpoint, the findings will offer significant implications for the development of destination marketing strategies. In today's competitive climate, creating and managing the right destination image have become vital for effective positioning and differentiation. More specifically, destination marketers could concentrate on formulating effective medical tourism packages, which address the expectations, needs and concerns of tourists and project Malaysia as an attractive medical tourism destination. Results of this study will reveal that examining the behavior intentions of foreign tourists, which are influenced by the favorable destination image, provides a better understanding of tourist retention.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This proposed study is conducted with the purpose of identifying relationships between international medical tourists' evaluations of Malaysia's destination image and their future destination choice. The results of this study will underline that destination marketers must take particular consideration of the image factor as this will affect tourists' future destination choice. Interestingly, the study will uncover the dimensions of Malaysia's destination image that are manifested by underlying factors of tourism destination attractions and medical healthcare attractions. From a practical standpoint, the findings will offer significant implications for the development of destination marketing strategies. In today's competitive climate, creating and managing the right destination image have become vital for effective positioning and differentiation. More specifically, destination marketers could concentrate on formulating effective medical tourism packages, which address the expectations, needs and concerns of tourists and project Malaysia as an attractive medical tourism destination. Results of this study will reveal that examining the behavior intentions of foreign tourists, which are influenced by the favorable destination image, provides a better understanding of

tourist retention.

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