# Medical tourism experiences, perceived value and tourists' happiness and word of mouth in Ho Chi Minh City: A qualitative exploration

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**DOI:**10.46223/HCMCOUJS.econ.en.16.4.4182.2026

Received: February 25th, 2025

Revised: March 10th, 2025

Accepted: March 28th, 2025

JEL classification code:

I11; L83; M31; Z32

*Keywords:*

medical tourism experiences;
medical tourist satisfaction;
perceived value;
tourist happiness;
word of mouth

**ABSTRACT**

This study addresses a growing need to understand how Medical Tourism Experiences (MTEx) shape tourists' Perceived Value (PV) and happiness, ultimately influencing Word-of-Mouth (WoM) in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The research identifies key factors influencing patient satisfaction and emotional well-being through in-depth qualitative interviews with 10 international medical tourists from 07 countries. The findings indicate that high-quality medical care, emotional support from healthcare providers, and integrating leisure activities are critical in enhancing PV and overall happiness. Participants reported that positive MTEx improved their emotional well-being and encouraged them to share their experiences with others, fostering positive WoM. The study highlights important implications for stakeholders, including healthcare providers and tourism operators, emphasizing the need for high-quality service delivery, cultural competence, and strategic communication to enhance the MTEx. Recommendations include training staff in cross-cultural patient care, improving customer service standards, and promoting local attractions to develop comprehensive medical tourism packages. Future research should focus on quantitative assessments to validate the identified relationships and examine the long-term impact of MTEx on patient well-being and loyalty. This study contributes to the broader understanding of medical tourism dynamics and provides actionable insights for enhancing patient satisfaction and destination competitiveness in HCMC and beyond.

## 1. Introduction

Traveling to another nation for medical treatment is known as "medical tourism" and frequently blends recreational activities with medical services. In recent years, this phenomenon has become increasingly popular and is now a rapidly expanding segment of the worldwide tourism industry. Patients seeking high-quality care at reduced costs or specialized treatments not available in their home countries are drawn to the medical tourism industry, which offers a wide range of services such as elective procedures, complex surgeries, and wellness treatments (Habibi et al., 2022; Salam et al., 2023). The growth of this sector can be attributed to various factors, including advancements in medical technology, the globalization of healthcare, and the increasing affordability of international travel (Habibi et al., 2022; Salam et al., 2023). Notably,

regions like Southeast Asia, including Ho Chi Minh City, have positioned themselves as attractive destinations for medical tourists due to their competitive pricing and quality healthcare services (Maltezou & Pavli, 2024; Salam et al., 2023).

Understanding the dynamics of medical tourism is crucial, particularly the interplay between tourists' experiences, perceived value, happiness, and Word of Mouth (WoM). Positive medical tourism experiences can significantly increase perceived value, raising visitor satisfaction and happiness levels (Taheri et al., 2021). Furthermore, satisfied medical tourists are more likely to engage in positive WoM communication, influencing the decisions of potential future travelers (Taheri et al., 2021). This relationship underscores the importance of delivering high-quality medical services and experiences that meet and exceed patient expectations, fostering loyalty and encouraging repeat visits (Taheri et al., 2021).

Formerly known as Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has become one of Southeast Asia's most popular destinations for medical tourism. The city has a strong healthcare infrastructure, with many hospitals and clinics providing a broad range of medical services, including major surgical treatments, dental care, and cosmetic surgery. International patients looking for medical services overseas find HCMC a desirable alternative due to the low cost of medical treatments and the excellent care from qualified medical experts (Abdul-Rahman et al., 2023; Maltezou & Pavli, 2024). According to recent studies, the availability of cutting-edge medical technologies and competitive prices have attracted many medical tourists to the city, especially from nearby nations (Maltezou & Pavli, 2024; Salam et al., 2023).

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of researching HCMC in Southeast Asia. As a rapidly developing urban center, the city serves as a microcosm of the broader trends in medical tourism across the region. With nations like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore competing for this profitable market, Southeast Asia has emerged as a medical tourism hotspot (Salam et al., 2023). Understanding the dynamics of medical tourism in HCMC can provide valuable insights into the factors that influence patient decision-making, satisfaction, and overall experiences in medical tourism. Additionally, this study can help create focused marketing plans and legislative frameworks that improve the city's attractiveness as a destination for medical tourism (Salam et al., 2023).

While prior research has examined medical tourism in other Southeast Asian countries, limited studies have focused on Ho Chi Minh City's rapidly evolving healthcare environment. Moreover, the existing literature has not fully explored the qualitative aspects of tourists' happiness and how these experiences translate into word-of-mouth behavior. Therefore, this study examines how medical tourism experiences in Ho Chi Minh City influence perceived value, tourists' happiness, and subsequent word-of-mouth intentions. Specifically, we seek to address the following questions:

1/ What ways do MTEx in HCMC contribute to tourists' WoM behavior?

2/ What factors shape their willingness to recommend the destination to others?

## 2. Literature review

### *2.1. Medical Tourism Experiences (MTEx)*

#### *2.1.1. Factors influencing medical tourism experiences*

Medical Tourism Experiences (MTEx) are shaped by many factors that can significantly impact patient satisfaction and overall outcomes. Xu et al. (2020) highlight that the quality of

medical services, the availability of information, and the emotional support provided during the medical journey are critical elements that influence the experiences of medical tourists. Furthermore, Salam et al. (2023) highlight that how medical tourists see their experiences can also be influenced by the cultural setting, which includes local norms and language obstacles. The interaction of these elements may result in different degrees of satisfaction, which in turn affects the possibility that patients may return for additional treatments or suggest the services to others.

Additionally, the role of personal expectations cannot be overlooked. Medical tourists often arrive with preconceived notions about the quality of care they will receive, which can be influenced by online reviews, WoM recommendations, and marketing materials (Xu et al., 2020). Travelers are more likely to report satisfying experiences when these expectations are fulfilled or surpassed. On the other hand, disappointment and unfavorable opinions of the MTEx may result from unfulfilled expectations (Salam et al., 2023).

*2.1.2. The role of service quality and customer experience management*

One crucial factor influencing medical tourism experiences is service quality. According to Dabaghi et al. (2021), to improve the entire experience of medical tourists, healthcare providers must implement efficient Customer Experience Management (CEM) techniques. Patient loyalty and satisfaction are directly correlated with high service quality, which is defined by promptness, empathy, and assurance (Dabaghi et al., 2021). This idea is further supported by Campbell et al. (2020), who show that patients are more likely to report satisfaction and refer others to high-quality services.

Moreover, integrating CEM practices, such as personalized care and proactive communication, can significantly enhance the medical tourism experience. By focusing on medical tourists' unique needs and preferences, healthcare providers can create a more tailored experience that fosters trust and satisfaction (Dabaghi et al., 2021). In addition to improving patient outcomes, this strategy enhances the medical tourism destination's reputation and increases its appeal to prospective patients (Campbell et al., 2020).

### *2.2. Tourists' happiness*

*2.2.1. The impact of medical tourism on tourists' happiness*

Tourist happiness is a multidimensional concept that reflects the emotional and psychological well-being experienced by individuals throughout their travel journey. This concept is commonly defined as the positive emotions derived from fulfilling psychological needs and meeting tourists' expectations (Filep & Deery, 2010; Majeed et al., 2020).

The components of tourist happiness can be categorized into various dimensions. Firstly, emotional well-being refers to the positive states that tourists experience during their trip, including joy, satisfaction, and excitement. This state is influenced by multiple factors, such as the quality of medical services, the environment of healthcare facilities, and interactions with local culture (Filep & Deery, 2010).

Furthermore, satisfaction is a crucial component of tourist happiness, representing how their expectations are met or exceeded. In medical tourism, satisfaction may stem from the quality of healthcare services, the expertise of medical professionals, and the dedicated support service providers provide. When medical tourists have positive experiences, they feel more reassured and develop greater trust and loyalty toward the destination (Ghosh & Mandal, 2019).

Medical service quality is the most critical factor in happiness among medical tourists. A high-quality healthcare system - a team of highly skilled medical professionals integrating advanced technology and effective treatment methods - directly impacts patient satisfaction (Mahmud et al., 2020). When medical tourists receive healthcare services that meet or exceed their expectations, they experience greater reassurance and are more likely to return to WoM and recommend the services to others (Mahmud et al., 2020).

Studies show that receiving medical care overseas can improve life satisfaction and well-being, especially for patients looking for treatments that might not be accessible or cheap in their native countries. Medical tourists are often happier due to the favorable results of successful medical procedures and the enriching travel experiences.

*2.2.2. Emotional experiences and their influence on overall satisfaction*

Their emotional experiences greatly influence travelers' overall happiness with medical tourism. Xu et al. (2023) focus on the experiences of Chinese medical tourists receiving cancer care, highlighting that emotional responses elicited during medical treatments - such as relief, joy, and gratitude - are significant predictors of overall satisfaction. Their qualitative study reveals that positive emotional experiences can enhance the perception of service quality and the perceived value of the medical services received. When tourists feel emotionally supported and cared for throughout their medical journey, their satisfaction levels increase, leading to a greater likelihood of recommending the services to others and returning for future treatments.

Moreover, the interplay between emotional experiences and overall satisfaction underscores the importance of healthcare providers focusing on the emotional aspects of patient care. Medical tourism providers may significantly improve their patients' emotional health by creating a compassionate and encouraging atmosphere, increasing their general satisfaction with the MTEx. To adequately meet the emotional requirements of medical tourists, healthcare personnel must receive training in emotional intelligence and patient-centered care.

### *2.3. Word of Mouth (WoM)*

*2.3.1. The influence of MTEx on WoM*

WoM refers to the informal exchange of information and personal experiences regarding services or products among individuals, typically including friends, family, and acquaintances. Within the tourism sector, WoM plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and influencing the decision-making processes of prospective travelers (Ali et al., 2023). Given the experiential nature of tourism, personal recommendations, and shared experiences significantly impact tourists' choices of destinations and services (Mahmud et al., 2020). Positive WoM can enhance a destination's reputation, attract new visitors, and foster loyalty among returning tourists, whereas negative WoM can deter potential visitors and damage a destination's image. As a result, tourism stakeholders must actively manage and promote positive communication among tourists.

In the context of medical tourism, the influence of WoM is even more pronounced, as patients rely heavily on the experiences and recommendations of others when making informed decisions about seeking medical treatment abroad. The credibility of WoM in this domain is heightened as medical tourists seek assurance regarding the quality, safety, and reliability of healthcare services (Ali et al., 2023). Positive MTEx - such as receiving high-quality treatment, interacting with skilled healthcare professionals, and benefiting from seamless service delivery can reinforce trust and satisfaction, thereby increasing the likelihood of patients recommending

the destination to others. Conversely, negative MTEx, such as poor medical outcomes, inadequate service quality, or unmet expectations, may result in unfavorable WoM, discouraging potential medical tourists.

Thus, managing WoM effectively in medical tourism is crucial for enhancing patient confidence, improving satisfaction levels, and strengthening the overall reputation of medical destinations. WoM is a powerful marketing tool that influences the initial decision-making process, long-term perceptions, and loyalty of medical tourists (Mahmud et al., 2020).

*2.3.2. Influence of tourist experiences on WoM*

The experiences of tourists significantly influence their propensity to engage in WoM communication. Mahmud et al. (2020) assert that positive experiences during a trip, including high-quality service, memorable interactions, and overall satisfaction, increase the likelihood of sharing favorable feedback with others (Mahmud et al., 2020). The study indicates that tourists with exceptional experiences are more inclined to recommend the destination and its services, generating positive WoM that can attract new visitors. This relationship underscores the importance of delivering high-quality experiences that meet or exceed tourists' expectations.

Cham et al. (2020) explore how tourists' experiences shape WoM. Their research highlights that the emotional aspects of a tourist's experience, such as joy, excitement, and satisfaction, play a critical role in determining the likelihood of sharing positive feedback. Tourists who feel emotionally connected to their experiences are likelier to engage in WoM as they seek to share their joy and satisfaction with others. Conversely, negative experiences can lead to detrimental WoM, significantly impacting a destination's reputation and future visitor numbers. Therefore, understanding the factors contributing to positive tourist experiences is essential for tourism operators aiming to foster favorable WoM and enhance their destination's appeal.

*2.3.3. Importance of word of mouth in medical tourism*

In the medical tourism sector, WoM is vital since it influences patient choices and the standing of healthcare providers. Hyder et al. (2019) emphasize that WoM is particularly impactful in medical tourism due to the high stakes in healthcare decisions. Patients often rely on recommendations from friends and family and online reviews when choosing medical services abroad, as these sources provide a sense of trust and credibility that is essential in the healthcare context. The authors argue that positive WoM can enhance the perceived value of medical services and encourage potential patients to pursue medical tourism options, thereby contributing to the industry's growth.

Taheri et al. (2021) further support this notion by highlighting that WoM affects initial patient choices and shapes the long-term reputation of medical tourism destinations. Happy patients will likely share positive experiences, which may pique the attention of potential new patients. On the other hand, bad encounters can lead to harmful WoM, which may deter future patients from thinking about a specific location or service. Therefore, for healthcare providers hoping to thrive in the cutthroat world of medical tourism, controlling patient experiences and encouraging positive WoM is essential.

***2.4. Perceived value in medical tourism***

*2.4.1. Definition and components of Perceived Value (PV)*

In medical tourism, emotional and social values are particularly significant, as they directly influence patient satisfaction and overall experience. Emotional value is derived from a

sense of security, comfort, and well-being, which MTEx through high-quality healthcare services and compassionate interactions with medical professionals (Mahmud et al., 2020). Trust in healthcare providers has enhanced patient confidence and reduced anxiety when seeking treatment abroad (Ghosh & Mandal, 2019).

Meanwhile, external validation shapes social value, reinforcing confidence in a chosen medical destination. As medical tourists often rely on WoM and testimonials when making healthcare decisions, social value is critical in shaping their perceptions and influencing their willingness to seek treatment in a foreign country (Kim & Chen, 2021). Given the high-risk nature of medical procedures, these intangible values contribute substantially to decision-making processes, affect patient loyalty, and increase the likelihood of recommending the destination to others (Hanefeld et al., 2015). Therefore, healthcare providers and medical tourism stakeholders should actively enhance emotional and social value to improve patient experiences and foster long-term trust in medical tourism destinations.

Understanding these components is crucial for healthcare providers and medical tourism facilitators, as they can tailor their offerings to enhance the PV for patients. Providers should develop a more alluring value proposition that draws and keeps medical tourists by emphasizing service quality improvement, attending to emotional needs, and highlighting the social advantages of medical tourism (Mahmud et al., 2020).

*2.4.2. Relationship between perceived value and customer satisfaction*

The relationship between PV and customer satisfaction is well-documented in the literature. Campbell et al. (2020) emphasize that higher perceived value leads to increased patient satisfaction, as patients who feel they have received good value for their investment are more likely to report positive experiences. According to their research, patients are more satisfied overall. They are more likely to refer medical services to others and return for additional treatments when they believe that the quality of those services is good about the expenses (Campbell et al., 2020).

Moreover, the implications of this relationship extend beyond immediate patient satisfaction. A positive perception of value can lead to increased loyalty and repeat visits, which is critical for the sustainability of medical tourism destinations. Therefore, healthcare providers must prioritize strategies that enhance PV, as this will improve patient satisfaction and foster long-term relationships with medical tourists, ultimately benefiting the broader medical tourism ecosystem (Campbell et al., 2020).

When the PV is high, tourists experience greater happiness and satisfaction, which increases the likelihood of positive WoM.

## 3. Methodology

To elucidate the Implications for WoM, PV, tourist happiness, and MTEx, this study employs a qualitative research approach to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of this phenomenon. Data collection is conducted through in-depth interviews and semi-structured questionnaires.

Qualitative methods allow us to explore how participants subjectively perceive MTEx, PV, Tourist happiness, and WoM, which aligns the thematic analysis method with the conceptual framework proposed to ensure objectivity and reliability. The software NVivo 15 is employed to facilitate data management, from transcription and coding to the identification of

key themes. This systematic approach enhances data organization, minimizes errors, and ensures a structured analysis process.

For this study, a qualitative technique is especially appropriate since it provides a deeper comprehension of the viewpoints and experiences of participants, something that quantitative approaches might not be able to convey fully. The value of qualitative methods in medical tourism research is emphasized by Xu et al. (2023), who points out that these approaches offer deep, contextual insights into patient experiences and decision-making.

*Data collection methods*

The study involved 10 international tourists who had received healthcare services in Ho Chi Minh City within the past year. Participants are selected based on criteria ensuring diversity in age, nationality, and types of medical services utilized, aiming to reflect the characteristics of medical tourists in this context accurately.

Each in-depth interview lasts between 40 and 60 minutes and is conducted in a one-on-one, face-to-face format. All interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy. Additionally, attention is given to the tone and manner of responses, assessing whether the participants' answers align with the contexts they describe.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the key findings addressing the study's aim of exploring how MTEx, Perceived Value, Happiness, and WoM interrelate in the context of HCMC.

### *4.1. Characteristics of interviewees*

**Table 1**

*Demographic Profile of Interviewees*

| No | Country | Occupation | Age | Gender | Travel intention | Code |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Korean | IT | 28 | F | Regular medical | R1 |
| 2 | Japanese | Student | 28 | M | Check up | R2 |
| 3 | China | Freelancer | 36 | F | Vaccination | R3 |
| 4 | America | Self-employed | 32 | F | IVF | R4 |
| 5 | Thailand | IT | 30 | M | Cosmetic dentistry | R5 |
| 6 | Australian | Freelancer | 42 | M | Cosmetic surgery | R6 |
| 7 | American | Housewife | 46 | F | Eye surgery | R7 |
| 8 | Australian | Housewife | 50 | F | Vaccination | R8 |
| 9 | American | Self-employed | 35 | M | Cosmetic dentistry | R9 |
| 10 | England | CEO | 55 | M | Check up | R10 |

*Note.* Author's synthesis

The interviewees ranged from 28 to 55, with an average age of 38. Regarding gender, there was an equal distribution of males and females. Among the interviewees, seven were professional workers, and three were students and homemakers. When choosing a medical tourism destination, interviewees said they would consider Southeast Asia, East Asia, America, and Europe.

**Table 2**

*The Themes Emerged from the Findings*

| Factors | Sub-factors | Description |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Quality of medical service | Quality of treatment | The effectiveness and high standards of medical services. |
| | Quality of customer service | The responsiveness and efficiency of services, including waiting time. |
| | Quality of equipment | The advancement and modernity of medical technologies. |
| 2. Convenience | Cost | The affordability and cost-effectiveness of medical services. |
| | Travel distance | The proximity and ease of access to medical facilities. |
| | Language | The availability of English-speaking staff or native language communication. |
| | Climate | The impact of weather conditions on the medical tourism experience. |

*Note.* Author's synthesis

Based on the findings, seven themes were categorized under two dimensions (see Table 2). In recent years, the quality of medical treatment in developing countries has improved considerably, reaching levels comparable to those in developed nations. However, all respondents consistently emphasized that the quality of medical services remains the most critical factor influencing their decision to seek treatment abroad. Many participants reported greater confidence in medical care received overseas compared to their home countries.

R3 stated: "The quality of medical treatment abroad is better than in China, which is why I choose to go overseas." Similarly, R4, who traveled for In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF), highlighted Malaysia's reputable medical standards and the government's active support for medical tourism.

Beyond quality concerns, respondents also cited personal motivations for seeking medical care abroad. R7, who underwent eye surgery, was influenced by a friend's positive experience in the U.S. R9, who sought cosmetic dentistry, opted for international treatment after experiencing unsuccessful procedures in China. Likewise, R10, who traveled for a routine check-up, expressed skepticism about China's healthcare system, particularly regarding misdiagnoses.

Some participants expressed a strong preference for treatment in developed countries due to perceived higher success rates. R1 explained: "Higher treatment success rates justify choosing developed nations for medical care." Similarly, R4 and R6 emphasized their preference for overseas treatment, attributing it to superior medical outcomes.

Additionally, interviewees identified specific factors influencing their decision to seek medical treatment abroad. R5, who traveled for cosmetic dentistry, highlighted the availability of advanced technology and specialized expertise: "Modern dental procedures abroad are more reliable and use superior materials." R6, who underwent cosmetic surgery, underscored the benefits of international clinics, noting their superior post-operative care and personalized treatment plans. R8 stressed the importance of stringent medical regulations: "Healthcare

systems in developed countries follow stricter protocols, ensuring patient safety and efficacy of treatment." Similarly, R2, who sought a comprehensive medical check-up, expressed greater trust in international medical standards, stating: "Comprehensive medical examinations abroad are more thorough and accurate".

### *4.2. Themes identified from qualitative data*

#### *4.2.1. Key experiences of medical tourists in HCMC*

The quality of medical care emerged as a central factor, with participants frequently highlighting the professionalism and expertise of healthcare providers. Additionally, many participants emphasized the supportive and compassionate environment created by the medical staff, which played a crucial role in alleviating anxiety and fostering a sense of comfort throughout their medical procedures.

Another recurring theme was the integration of medical treatment with leisure activities. Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to explore the city and immerse themselves in its culture while undergoing medical treatment. This combination of healthcare and tourism contributed to their satisfaction and happiness and enhanced their perception of the medical tourism experience. Many participants expressed a strong inclination to share their positive experiences with others, indicating that their satisfaction with medical services was closely tied to their overall enjoyment of the trip.

#### *4.2.2. Perceived value and its dimensions as reported by participants*

Participants in the study articulated various dimensions of PV that influenced their medical tourism experiences. Mahmud et al. (2020) identify functional, emotional, and social values as critical components of perceived value in medical tourism. Many participants reported that the functional value derived from high-quality medical care and successful treatment outcomes was paramount. They felt the cost savings associated with receiving care in HCMC compared to their home countries further enhanced this functional value.

Functional value was regarded as the most critical component, with many participants emphasizing the importance of high-quality medical care and successful treatment outcomes. The affordability of medical procedures in HCMC compared to their home countries further reinforced the functional value, as participants perceived substantial cost savings while receiving comparable or superior healthcare services (Mahmud et al., 2020).

Emotional value also played a significant role in shaping participants' perceptions. Many tourists expressed relief and happiness following successful medical procedures, contributing to their overall satisfaction and well-being. This emotional aspect was often linked to supportive interactions with healthcare professionals, which fostered trust and comfort during their medical journey (Mahmud et al., 2020).

Social value emerged as another important dimension, with participants noting that receiving care in a culturally rich environment added to their overall experience. They appreciated the opportunity to engage with local culture and connect with other medical tourists, which enhanced their sense of belonging and community during their stay (Mahmud et al., 2020).

#### *4.2.3. Relationship between happiness and overall satisfaction with medical services*

The qualitative data collected from medical tourists in HCMC revealed a strong relationship between happiness and overall satisfaction with the medical services received.

Participants consistently reported that successful medical treatments significantly enhanced their emotional well-being. While Xu et al. (2023) discuss the lived experiences of medical tourists, their findings primarily focus on the challenges and concerns patients face rather than directly linking positive health outcomes to happiness and life satisfaction.

*4.2.4. Insights on WoM and its impact on future medical tourism decisions*

The qualitative insights gathered from participants also highlighted the significant impact of WOM on their future medical tourism decisions. Many respondents indicated that their choices to pursue medical care in HCMC were heavily influenced by recommendations from friends, family, and online reviews. WoM is a powerful tool in the medical tourism industry, as potential patients often seek reassurance and validation from the experiences of others before making healthcare decisions. Participants expressed that hearing positive testimonials from previous medical tourists instilled confidence in their choice of destination and provider (Taheri et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Taheri et al. (2021) found that satisfied patients are more likely to engage in positive WoM, which can significantly influence the decisions of prospective medical tourists. Participants in this study reported that their positive experiences motivated them to share their stories with others, thereby contributing to a cycle of positive recommendations. This highlights the importance of delivering high-quality medical services and fostering positive patient experiences, as these factors enhance individual satisfaction and play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions and decisions of future medical tourists.

***4.3. Case studies***

*4.3.1. Case study 1: The experience of a Chinese medical tourist*

In a qualitative study by Xu et al. (2023), a Chinese medical tourist shared her journey of receiving cancer treatment in HCMC. The patient reported feeling anxious before her trip, primarily due to concerns about the quality of care and the unfamiliar environment. However, upon arrival, she was pleasantly surprised by the professionalism and empathy shown by the medical staff. This positive interaction significantly enhanced her perceived value of the services, leading to a sense of happiness and relief following her successful treatment. The patient noted that her positive experience motivated her to share her story with friends and family, generating positive word of mouth about the medical services in HCMC. This case exemplifies how high-quality care and emotional support can increase happiness and satisfaction, fostering positive recommendations to others. This case exemplifies how high-quality care and emotional support can increase happiness.

*4.3.2. Case study 2: The impact of word of mouth on future decisions*

Another case involved a group of Indonesian medical tourists who traveled to HCMC for cosmetic surgery. In a study by Mahmud et al. (2020), participants highlighted the significant role that word-of-mouth played in choosing this destination. Many had heard positive testimonials from friends who had previously undergone procedures in the city. This social influence shaped their expectations and contributed to their overall satisfaction with the medical services they received. Participants expressed that their successful outcomes and positive experiences would lead them to recommend the services to others, thus perpetuating a cycle of positive WoM. This case illustrates the critical link between patient satisfaction, happiness, and the likelihood of sharing positive experiences, which can significantly impact future medical tourism decisions.

*4.3.3. Case study 3: Emotional well-being and perceived value*

A further case study involved a patient from the Middle East who sought dental treatment in HCMC. The patient reported that the combination of high-quality dental care and the opportunity to explore the city contributed to a heightened sense of happiness during the trip. The patient emphasized that the perceived value of the dental services was enhanced by the cultural experiences and leisure activities enjoyed during the stay. This case highlights how integrating medical services with tourism can improve emotional well-being and perceived value, ultimately leading to greater satisfaction and the likelihood of recommending the destination to others (Mahmud et al., 2020).

## 5. Discussion

### *5.1. Interpretation of findings*

*5.1.1. How experiences shape perceived value and happiness*

The findings of this study highlight the critical role that experiences play in shaping perceived value and happiness among medical tourists. As Campbell et al. (2020) indicated, the quality of medical services and the overall experience significantly influence patients' perceptions of value. Participants in this study reported that their interactions with healthcare providers, the quality of care received, and the emotional support offered during their medical journey were pivotal in enhancing their perceived value of the services.

Moreover, the emotional responses elicited during the medical journey - such as relief, happiness, and a sense of accomplishment - contributed to overall well-being. Participants expressed that successful treatment outcomes met their medical needs and positively impacted their emotional state, reinforcing that medical tourism experiences extend beyond mere transactional interactions. The interplay between high-quality care and positive emotional experiences underscores the importance of a holistic approach to patient care, where emotional and psychological aspects are integrated into the medical tourism experience.

*5.1.2. The role of PV in enhancing tourists' happiness and encouraging WoM*

PV emerged as a significant factor in enhancing tourists' happiness and encouraging positive WoM. This finding is consistent with Xu et al. (2020), who emphasize that satisfied patients are more inclined to engage in positive WoM, which can significantly influence the decisions of potential future medical tourists.

Participants in this study frequently mentioned that their positive experiences led them to recommend HCMC as a medical tourism destination to friends and family. This suggests that PV not only enhances individual happiness but also fosters a sense of loyalty and advocacy among medical tourists. The implications of these findings are profound, as they highlight the need for healthcare providers to focus on delivering high-quality services that enhance perceived value. By doing so, they can cultivate a positive reputation in the medical tourism market, ultimately driving growth and sustainability in the sector.

### *5.2. Implications*

*5.2.1. Recommendations for healthcare providers and tourism operators in HCMC*

Given the growing significance of MTEx in shaping patient satisfaction and influencing WoM behavior, healthcare providers and tourism operators in HCMC must adopt comprehensive strategies to enhance service delivery. Consistent with prior literature

highlighting the impact of service quality, customer experience management, and emotional well-being on tourist satisfaction (Dabaghi et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023), stakeholders should focus on integrating medical care with high-quality hospitality and cultural engagement to strengthen the city's competitive position as a medical tourism destination.

First, healthcare providers should implement patient-centered care models, emphasizing emotional support, clear communication, and cultural competence. Training healthcare professionals in cross-cultural interactions and patient engagement strategies can help mitigate language barriers and enhance trust (Salam et al., 2023). Additionally, improving the efficiency and accessibility of medical services through seamless appointment scheduling, telehealth consultations, and digital patient support can enhance the PV of care and patient convenience (Dabaghi et al., 2021).

Second, tourism operators should collaborate with healthcare institutions to develop comprehensive medical tourism packages that combine medical services with leisure activities, as this integration has been shown to enhance tourists' overall happiness and satisfaction (Filep, 2010). Marketing efforts should emphasize HCMC's affordability, high-quality healthcare infrastructure, and cultural attractions, positioning the city as an attractive alternative to other regional medical tourism hubs such as Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore (Maltezou & Pavli, 2024).

Finally, healthcare providers and tourism businesses must leverage digital platforms to manage and promote positive WoM communication. Encouraging patient testimonials, online reviews, and social media engagement can amplify trust and credibility, influencing prospective medical tourists' decisions (Ali et al., 2023).

*5.2.2. Strategies for improving MTEx to enhance PV and happiness*

To optimize the MTEx and maximize its impact on PV, happiness, and WoM behavior, a holistic approach that integrates service quality, emotional experiences, and social value is essential (Mahmud et al., 2020).

First, improving functional value: Patients prioritize treatment effectiveness, affordability, and accessibility when evaluating their MTEx. Ensuring state-of-the-art medical facilities, internationally accredited healthcare standards, and transparent pricing structures can reinforce trust and perceived value, increasing the likelihood of repeat visits and positive referrals (Campbell et al., 2020).

Second, strengthening emotional value: As emotional well-being significantly influences patient satisfaction, healthcare providers should focus on creating a compassionate and stress-free medical environment. This includes personalized patient care, empathetic provider-patient interactions, and post-treatment support programs (Xu et al., 2023). Facilitating patient-centered hospitality services can enhance tourists' emotional connection to the destination, fostering long-term loyalty (Ghosh & Mandal, 2019).

Third, increasing social value: The opportunity for cultural immersion and meaningful social interactions enhances the perceived value of medical tourism (Kim & Chen, 2021). Promoting medical retreats, guided city tours, and community engagement initiatives can enrich tourists' experiences and encourage positive WoM communication. By positioning HCMC as not just a healthcare destination but also a culturally enriching travel experience, stakeholders can differentiate the city from competing medical tourism markets (Mahmud et al., 2020).

Future research should explore quantitative models to validate these relationships and investigate the long-term impact of MTEx on patient loyalty and destination reputation. Additionally, analyzing digital WoM trends and online patient communities can provide further insights into the evolving role of social media in medical tourism decision-making (Ali et al., 2023).

## 6. Conclusions

### *6.1. Summary of key findings*

The findings of this study indicate that they shape their perceptions of quality, personal experiences, and trust in regulatory standards. Tourists who reported positive experiences with medical care, emotional support from healthcare providers, and leisure activity opportunities were likelier to share their experiences with others. Their satisfaction enhanced their overall happiness and motivated them to recommend HCMC as a medical tourism destination, influencing the decisions of potential future visitors.

The study further highlights that high-quality medical services, personalized care, and emotional reassurance from healthcare providers are crucial in shaping tourists' willingness to recommend the destination to others. Participants emphasized that trust in the medical system, affordability, and healthcare integration with tourism activities contributed to their satisfaction. These factors collectively fostered a sense of well-being and encouraged positive WoM communication, reinforcing HCMC's reputation as a desirable medical tourism destination.

The interconnectedness of these elements underscores the importance of adopting a holistic approach to medical tourism - one that prioritizes not only the technical quality of medical care but also patients' emotional well-being and overall experience to enhance satisfaction, loyalty, and recommendation behavior.

### *6.2. Suggestions for future research*

One key area is the quantitative assessment of the relationships between these variables, which could provide a more structured understanding of how different factors contribute to WoM behavior. Future studies could also examine how demographic characteristics, such as age, nationality, and prior medical tourism experiences, influence tourists' willingness to recommend HCMC as a medical tourism destination.

Additionally, investigating the role of cultural differences in shaping perceptions of medical service quality and emotional satisfaction could provide deeper insights into why some tourists are more likely to engage in positive WoM than others. Another promising research direction is the long-term impact of MTEx on patients' well-being and loyalty. Longitudinal studies could explore whether initial positive experiences lead to repeat visits and sustained engagement with medical tourism in HCMC.

Furthermore, with the increasing influence of digital communication, future research should explore how social media and online review platforms shape WoM behavior in medical tourism. Understanding how digital WoM spreads and influences potential medical tourists could help industry stakeholders develop more effective marketing and patient engagement strategies to enhance HCMC's position in the competitive medical tourism market.

### *6.3. Limitations*

First, the qualitative approach employed in this study inherently limits the generalizability of the findings. The data were collected from a relatively small number of

interviewees through purposive sampling, primarily within the researcher's network. This may introduce bias and restrict the diversity of perspectives. Future studies should consider employing a quantitative methodology with a larger and more representative sample to validate these findings and enhance their applicability across broader populations.

Second, the study's focus on medical tourists in HCMC may not reflect the experiences of all medical tourists in Vietnam or other regions. The insights gained from this specific context may not be transferable to other cities or countries with different healthcare systems and tourism dynamics. Future research should aim to include participants from various geographical locations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of MTEx.

Finally, this study did not explore the potential influence of respondents' socio-demographic factors, such as income level, education, and cultural background, on their medical tourism intentions and experiences. These variables could significantly impact tourists' perceptions and behaviors. Future research should incorporate these socio-demographic factors to understand better the complexities surrounding medical tourism consumption and to identify tailored strategies for different demographic groups.

## SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION

The manuscript clearly identifies a research gap; the manuscript proposes a new theoretical or analytical model; the manuscript introduces or improves research methods; the manuscript presents statistically and practically significant findings; the manuscript provides new datasets or empirical evidence; the manuscript offers policy/managerial/technological implications

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CRediT: **To Phuoc Hai**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Qualitative Design, Investigation/Data Collection, Interviews, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing.

## FUNDING

This research received no external funding

## NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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