

Cultural Proximity and Service Quality in Medical Tourism: Predicting Revisit Intentions of Chinese Fertility Tourists in Malaysia

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Abstract

The medical tourism industry, particularly in the field of fertility treatments, heavily relies on maintaining customer loyalty for long-term sustainability. Revisit intention is a key metric for measuring this loyalty. Malaysia has emerged as a leading destination for Chinese fertility tourists due to its high-quality medical services, cultural and linguistic compatibility, and advanced reproductive technologies, which complement the gaps in assisted reproductive technology (ART) services available domestically in China. However, existing research on revisit intention in this context tends to focus on “traditional satisfaction” as the core mediating variable, often neglecting the role of service quality as an “objective vehicle” linking cultural factors with behavioral intentions. This conceptual paper examines the interaction between cultural proximity, service quality (using the SERVQUAL dimensions), and repeat visit intention among Chinese medical tourists seeking fertility treatments in Malaysia. By positioning service quality as the core mediating variable, this paper aims to explore how cultural proximity translates into repeat visit intentions through specific service quality dimensions. This study seeks to fill the research gap in the fertility tourism sector regarding this mechanism and provide insights for enhancing patient loyalty within the industry.

Keywords

Medical tourism, Cultural proximity, Service quality, Revisit intention

Introduction

The medical tourism sector has expanded rapidly as a consumer market, with its growth largely sustained by a stable base of tourist consumers [1]. For businesses in this field, long-term viability depends heavily on their capacity to build and maintain brand loyalty among these consumers. A key economic reality underscores this: retaining current customers costs roughly one-fifth of what it takes to attract new ones [2]. This makes the study of revisit intentions not just relevant, but essential for understanding how to sustain success in medical tourism, especially in specialized areas like fertility treatment. Malaysia has emerged as a global front-runner in medical tourism, ranking first in a recent assessment by Dubai’s Nomad Capitalist, a wealth consultancy. The country’s top-ranking stems from its combination of high-quality healthcare infrastructure, skilled medical practitioners, competitive pricing, and widespread use of English. Among international patients, Chinese tourists are

particularly drawn to Malaysia for fertility-related care. Since China ended its one-child policy in 2016, demand for fertility treatments has risen sharply, and Malaysia has become a preferred destination for many Chinese citizens seeking such services [3,4]. A major reason for this preference is cultural and linguistic alignment: nearly 25% of Malaysia’s population is of Chinese origin, and many medical staff are fluent in Mandarin, which minimizes communication barriers that often complicate cross-border healthcare [5].

This trend of Chinese patients seeking fertility treatments in Malaysia is further fueled by challenges in China’s domestic assisted reproductive technology (ART) sector. China’s fertility policies have shifted in recent years - with the full implementation of the two-child policy in 2016 and the three-child policy in 2021 - aimed at addressing population aging and balancing demographic structure [6]. However, these policy changes coincide

with a rising infertility rate (now at 17.6%) linked to delayed childbearing and declining fertility, driving greater demand for ART. Domestically, ART services face significant limitations: the clinical pregnancy rate for in vitro fertilization (IVF) averages 50.0% (with live birth rates between 30.0% and 45.0%), and for women over 40, this rate drops to approximately 20.0%. Resource distribution is also highly uneven - 76.2% of IVF services are concentrated in major cities, forcing patients from rural or remote areas to undertake grueling journeys (sometimes up to 30 hours) to access care [7]. These challenges have led many Chinese couples to look abroad for ART, with Malaysia standing out due to its geographic proximity, advanced fertility technologies, supportive policies, and cultural familiarity [8].

Malaysia's appeal in fertility care extends beyond accessibility. Its IVF clinical pregnancy rate, at 66%, outperforms both China's national average (50%) and the global average (50%). Culturally, Malaysia also addresses needs that are often unmet in Western countries. For example, the Chinese postnatal practice of "zuo yuezi" (confinement), which includes avoiding cold water and using traditional Chinese medicine for recovery, is widely recognized and accommodated in Malaysian clinics. This contrasts with many Western destinations, where such customs are less understood or integrated into care. Combined with Mandarin-speaking medical staff (40% of practitioners) and Chinese-language signage in clinics, these cultural adaptations reduce discomfort and enhance the overall experience for Chinese patients.

To explore what drives Chinese fertility tourists to revisit Malaysia, this study focuses on the interplay between cultural proximity, service quality, and revisit intention. Currently, in analyzing the influencing mechanisms of revisit intention, existing research generally takes "traditional satisfaction" as the core mediating variable, considering it the key link connecting antecedent factors to revisit intention [9]. Based on this, this study selects service quality as the core mediating variable and measures it using the SERVQUAL model. This model defines service quality as "the gap between customers' expectations and their actual perceptions" and quantifies service performance through five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It has also been proven to directly influence customers' experience evaluations [10]. This shift in perspective

aims to fill a gap in existing research - especially in the field of fertility tourism, where the mechanism by which cultural proximity is transformed into revisit intention through specific service quality dimensions (rather than abstract traditional satisfaction) has not been systematically explored. In essence, this conceptual paper intends to examine how cultural proximity (such as alignment in language and traditional customs) and service quality (assessed through SERVQUAL dimensions) interact to influence Chinese medical tourists' intention to revisit Malaysia for fertility treatment.

Literature review

Under the dual impetus of adjustments in China's fertility policies and the growing demand for cross-border medical services, Malaysia has emerged as a core destination for Chinese fertility tourists, thanks to its unique advantages. Its appeal stems not only from advanced assisted reproductive technologies and cost benefits but also from cultural similarities with China - such as language compatibility (with some clinics offering services in Chinese), an understanding of traditions like the "zuo yuezi" (postpartum confinement), and shared culinary customs. This cultural proximity significantly reduces the psychological distance for Chinese tourists, making Malaysia a preferred choice over other countries. In terms of market conditions, by 2016, Chinese outbound fertility tourism expenditure had reached 1.1 billion USD, with a substantial number of Chinese visitors seeking services at private fertility clinics in Malaysia accredited by the Medical Tourism [11]. However, existing studies primarily focus on satisfaction as a mediating variable, overlooking the mediating role of service quality within the SERVQUAL model. This study aims to specifically fill this theoretical gap.

Revisit intention

When discussing revisit intention, it can be regarded as a manifestation of intention [12]. According to Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), intention is generated through the interaction of specific factors and serves as a strong predictor of behavior. Ajzen explains that intention reflects individuals' motivation, indicating their willingness to engage in a particular action and the effort they are willing to exert for that behavior. In simple terms, the stronger the intention, the higher the likelihood

of individuals engaging in the behavior. Therefore, intention to revisit refers to a tourist's positive behavioral intention to return to a destination or engage in similar tourism activities, influenced by their evaluation of past experiences. This intention reflects their assessment of previous encounters, which serves as a predictor for future travel behavior [13].

(1) Revisit intention in Malaysia medical tourism

In recent years, Malaysia has become one of the world's leading medical tourism destinations, with a high rate of repeat visitors. This success can be attributed to the country's outstanding medical services, attractive cost advantages, and a well-crafted destination brand image. According to the latest data, in 2023, the country's medical tourism sector generated over 2 billion Malaysian Ringgit (approximately 436 million USD) from 1.3 million foreign patients.

The destination image plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' intention to revisit. Taking Chinese medical tourists as an example, they generally associate Malaysia with "international standard hospitals", "advanced and comprehensive medical facilities", and "holistic care that perfectly integrates treatment and leisure". The Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC), through precise marketing strategies, has focused on establishing cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang as benchmark destinations that embody the "fusion of modern medicine and cultural hospitality", further reinforcing this positive image. Meanwhile, tourists' perception of the local medical services as "exceptional value for money" has strongly contributed to the increased intention to revisit. For Chinese tourists, Malaysia's cultural similarities and language convenience are particularly notable. Around a quarter of Malaysia's population is of Chinese descent, sharing many cultural similarities and holiday traditions with China. This cultural affinity helps Chinese visitors feel at ease and reduces anxiety in an unfamiliar environment. Furthermore, Malaysia's affordable medical costs and high-quality healthcare services are particularly attractive to price-sensitive Chinese tourists.

(2) Fertility treatment

Fertility treatment refers to a patient who crosses national borders to seek assisted reproductive technology (ART) treatments or healthcare in another country. The international committee for monitoring assisted reproductive technologies (ICMART) defines assisted reproductive technologies (ART) as any procedures that

involve the in vitro manipulation of both human oocytes and sperm, or embryos, for the purpose of reproduction. This encompasses, but is not limited to, in vitro fertilization (IVF) and embryo transfer (ET); intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI); embryo biopsy; preimplantation genetic testing (PGT); assisted hatching; gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT); zygote intrafallopian transfer; cryopreservation of gametes and embryos; semen, oocyte, and embryo donation; and cycles involving gestational carriers [14].

Cultural proximity

In the specialized domain of cross-border fertility medicine, cultural proximity transcends macro-level societal similarities; it represents a functional alignment between the destination's medical environment and the patient's sociocultural expectations [15]. While foundational literature defines cultural proximity as the degree of congruence in beliefs and values between societies, this study redefines the concept within the high-contact, high-risk clinical encounter [16]. In this context, cultural proximity is operationalized as the alignment in medical communication paradigms, reproductive health beliefs, and service interaction expectations.

Research indicates that cultural background serves as a fundamental cognitive filter shaping service evaluations. This pattern is validated in general sectors like banking, but its influence is significantly amplified in healthcare, where trust and psychological safety are paramount [17]. For Chinese fertility tourists, Malaysia's cultural proximity - manifested in its clinical recognition of *zuo yue zi* (postnatal confinement) and the availability of Mandarin-speaking medical staff - allows service delivery to resonate with the patient's internal cultural logic. Such alignment acts as a critical "buffer" that reduces perceived cross-cultural risk, directly influencing how patients evaluate the professionalism and empathy of their care providers.

Crucially, this cultural resonance is a decisive determinant of revisit intention. Unlike general tourism, medical revisit intentions are heavily predicated on the patient's sense of "cultural safety" and the ease of navigating complex medical ethical landscapes [18]. When the medical environment aligns with a patient's home-country norms, it fosters a psychological climate of trust that encourages long-term loyalty. Therefore, in this study, cultural proximity is theorized to drive revisit intentions by being operationalized through: (a) language

accessibility; (b) awareness and acceptance of specific reproductive health customs; and (c) shared norms in doctor-patient interactions.

Service quality

Service quality is a subjective and multidimensional concept that reflects the gap between consumer expectations and the actual service experience. It is grounded in the idea that consumers assess service quality based on how well their expectations align with the service they receive. This subjective evaluation is shaped by various factors that influence the consumer's overall perception of the service, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions are used to evaluate the interactions between service providers and consumers, with the outcome reflecting the consumer's perceptions and emotional responses throughout the service process.

(1) Medical service quality in Malaysia

The main competitive advantages of Malaysia's private

hospitals lie in the quality of medical services, which includes treatment outcomes, patient rights, and privacy protection, as well as overall service quality [19]. The study found that trust in healthcare providers mediates the relationship between satisfaction and the willingness to revisit, with 68.7% of the variance in satisfaction being explained by perceived service quality. This finding aligns with the research which highlights that patients trust Malaysian hospitals due to their "successful treatment records" and "transparent communication." High-quality medical services not only address the immediate treatment needs of patients but also serve as a key factor in attracting them to choose Malaysia for future medical care.

Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, this conceptual paper attempts to determine the relationship between cultural proximity and revisit intention, with service quality (operationalized through the SERVQUAL dimensions) acting as the mediating variable.



Figure 1. Proposed research model.

This conceptual paper holds substantial significance as it is poised to deliver valuable insights to relevant stakeholders in the field of fertility-related medical tourism. A case in point is managers of Malaysian fertility clinics, who are dedicated to boosting the retention rate of Chinese medical tourists. The research seeks to investigate the effect of cultural proximity on revisit intention and the mediating function of service quality in this relationship. The findings concerning these connections are expected to offer practical recommendations to fertility clinics, guiding them on how to make the most of cultural strengths and refine service quality to heighten Chinese tourists' intention to revisit.

Conclusion

This study is a conceptual paper focusing on Chinese medical tourists seeking fertility treatment in Malaysia. It conducts an in-depth analysis of the intrinsic connections between cultural proximity, service quality (measured through SERVQUAL dimensions), and revisit intention. By constructing and demonstrating the theoretical mechanism through which cultural proximity influences service quality and further acts on revisit, this research addresses the gap in the current fertility tourism literature regarding the use of service quality, instead of traditional, as a mediating variable.

From a theoretical perspective, most existing studies on revisit intention in medical tourism take subjective

satisfaction as the core mediating variable. This study breaks through this limitation by adopting the SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) as the objective carriers for quantifying service quality. It clarifies how cultural proximity - such as shared language between China and Malaysia, recognition of practices like “confinement” (postnatal care rituals), and support from the Chinese community in Malaysia, translates into tourists’ revisit intention through specific service dimensions. In doing so, it establishes a clear theoretical framework and provides operable variable measurement pathways for subsequent empirical research in this field. In terms of practical implications, the synergistic effect of cultural proximity and high-quality services holds significant value for the Malaysian fertility medical tourism sector. Cultural proximity can reduce the cross-cultural perceived risk and communication costs of Chinese tourists, helping medical institutions quickly gain tourists’ trust and form a differentiated competitive advantage distinct from Western medical destinations such as Europe and the United States. Enhancing service quality based on the SERVQUAL dimensions can directly optimize tourists’ medical experience. For instance, medical institutions can improve Chinese-language service procedures (responsiveness), deploy medical teams familiar with Chinese culture (empathy), and upgrade medical facilities that meet Chinese-style needs (tangibles). Such measures can significantly enhance tourists’ sense of belonging and satisfaction, thereby increasing tourist retention rates and word-of-mouth communication effects. The combination of cultural proximity and high-quality services helps the Malaysian fertility medical sector attract more Chinese clients, alleviating issues in China’s domestic assisted reproductive technology (ART) sector, such as uneven resource distribution and limited success rates. Meanwhile, it promotes the development of Malaysia’s medical tourism industry toward the “culturally adaptive” niche, facilitating the sustainable development of this sector.

It should be noted that this study is currently in the conceptual research phase. Future research will enter the empirical verification phase. Specifically, it plans to collect sample data from Chinese tourists who have received fertility treatment in Malaysia through questionnaires and use structural equation modeling

(SEM) to verify the theoretical hypotheses proposed in this study. This will further examine the causal relationships and the strength of the mediating effect among cultural proximity, each dimension of service quality, and revisit intention. The results of subsequent empirical research will provide data support for the improvement of the theoretical model and offer more targeted practical suggestions for Malaysian fertility medical institutions, industry associations, and policymakers. This will help this sector better meet the needs of the Chinese market and achieve long-term and stable development.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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