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To cite this article: Haluk Tanriverdi, Kartal Doğukan Çiki, Nursaç Uygun & Saliha Çiki (27 Mar 2025): Narratives of medical tourists travelling for hair transplant: a case of Turkiye, Tourism Recreation Research, DOI: [10.1080/02508281.2025.2471484](https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2025.2471484)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2025.2471484>



Published online: 27 Mar 2025.



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## Narratives of medical tourists travelling for hair transplant: a case of Türkiye

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to evaluate the experiences of international tourists who travel to Türkiye for hair transplant procedures and the quality of services they encounter throughout this process. By analysing tourists' perceptions through reviews on Trustpilot, the research identifies key service components that shape these experiences, shedding light on the multidimensional nature of hair transplant tourism. The research employs a content analysis approach to analyse online reviews collected from Trustpilot. This qualitative method allows for an in-depth understanding of tourists' experiences with various aspects of hair transplant services in Türkiye, focusing on six main components. This research contributes to the medical tourism literature by providing a comprehensive model that encapsulates the full patient journey in hair transplant tourism. By highlighting the importance of interconnected service components, it offers practical insights for clinics and sector stakeholders to enhance patient experience. The research identifies that hair transplant procedures represent a multifaceted experience where each service component plays a crucial role in the overall journey. It was determined that the experiences of tourists travelling for hair transplantation consist of six main components, including 'clinic and equipment quality', 'service quality', 'price-performance perception', 'transfer and accommodation services', 'fulfillment of expectations', 'follow-up processes'.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 October 2024  
Accepted 22 January 2025

### KEYWORDS

Medical tourism; hair transplant journey; hair transplant tourism; international tourists; digital diaries

## Introduction

Hair transplantation has become one of the aesthetic medical interventions that has attracted increasing attention in recent years. This globally growing field has gained great momentum thanks to both the development of technology and the increase in the success rates of medical procedures (Trivellini et al., 2021). Hair loss stands out as a problem that can have serious effects on both physical appearance and self-confidence for many people (Grimalt, 2005). In this context, hair transplantation is not only an aesthetic procedure, but also a health service that improves the psychological and social well-being of individuals (Fiebiger et al., 2004).

While medical tourism has emerged as a type of tourism where people travel to other countries to benefit from health services, hair transplantation has also gained an important place in this context (Connell, 2006; Smith & Puczkó, 2015). Especially in the field of aesthetic surgery, hair transplantation directs many people around the world to countries where health services are affordable (Klein et al., 2016). At this point, Türkiye, which is one of the prominent countries among the destinations where hair transplantation operations are performed, draws attention with its

success in this field (Tamer Bakar & Akyurek, 2021). However, hair transplantation is not only a technical intervention, but also includes many different dimensions that should be considered as part of health care (Dinh & Sinclair, 2007).

The interest in hair transplantation operations does not only stem from aesthetic concerns (Jimenez et al., 2021). Individuals prefer these procedures with the motivation of feeling better about themselves, gaining social acceptance and having a higher self-confidence while struggling with hair loss (Yun, 2023). Therefore, these operations are not only an aesthetic change, but also a process that directly affects the quality of life of individuals. The techniques used, clinical service quality and customer experience play a major role in the success of the operation (Tam, 2007). This explains why hair transplantation has become so popular within the scope of medical tourism.

In recent years, developing technologies and innovative approaches in the field of hair transplantation have enabled this process to produce faster, safer and more successful results (Kolimi et al., 2022). In particular, modern techniques such as Follicular Unit Extraction (FUE) offer fast recovery processes with its minimally

invasive structure and provide natural looks (Anastassakis, 2023). These advances in hair transplantation operations have not only increased individual satisfaction, but have also led to an increase in international demand for these operations (Yoo et al., 2019).

Türkiye has become one of the leading medical tourism destinations in the field of hair transplantation worldwide, but there is a research gap in this field. In this context, the current research aims to fill an important gap in the literature on hair transplantation within the scope of medical tourism. This research aims to evaluate the service quality offered by clinics serving in this field from the perspective of visitors. The results of the research will guide clinics to improve their service quality and increase customer satisfaction.

## Literature review

### Medical tourism

Since the earliest periods of history, people have travelled to different geographies in search of a healthy life (Deaton, 2024). In ancient times, the deep connection between health and religious beliefs led people to seek healing in areas considered sacred (Elendu, 2024). In ancient civilisations, hot springs, thermal springs and temple baths came to the fore as places that were thought to treat both physical and mental illnesses (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). In Europe during the Middle Ages, pilgrimages were seen not only as a religious experience but also as an opportunity for spiritual and physical healing (Scott, 2010). During these periods, journeys to healing waters, natural minerals and sacred places enabled individuals in search of health to cross geographical boundaries (Foley, 2010). Therefore, as one of the oldest and universal phenomena in human history, health travel has been shaped by the cultural, religious and scientific accumulation of different periods and the influence of various cultural and geographical factors (Meade & Emch, 2010; Peng et al., 2023).

Especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europeans travelled to the hot springs in the south of France to take advantage of the sunny climates and escape the cold weather conditions (Ben-Natan et al., 2009). After the nineteenth century, travel to other countries for the treatment of various diseases increased and this led to the importance of international medical tourism (Asa et al., 2024). Such travels have become more organised over time and have laid the foundations of modern health tourism (Connell, 2013). With the twenty-first century, the acceleration of globalisation has brought a new dimension to the concepts of

health and travel (Labonté et al., 2011). In this period, people have brought a different perspective to medical tourism by combining health services with leisure and tourism activities, and the dynamics of wellness tourism have been reshaped (Gustavo, 2010; Kelly, 2012).

Nowadays, many authors define health tourism as a broad umbrella term that encompasses sub-formations such as spa, wellness and medical tourism (Smith & Puczkó, 2015). In this context, health tourism is not only an activity focused on treating diseases (Almodawer et al., 2024), but also a multifaceted field that aims to improve the quality of life of individuals and promote well-being in general (Moscardo, 2011). This definition clearly reveals the continuity between the historical roots of medical tourism and its modern practices. In this research, the concept of medical tourism is adopted and the focus is on hair transplantation travel, which is considered as a part of medical tourism.

The phenomenon of patients choosing to travel to an overseas health facility for high quality health services such as fertility, cosmetic surgery, dental care, organ transplantation or elective surgery is known as medical tourism (Lunt et al., 2016; Lunt & Carrera, 2010). On the other hand, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defines medical tourism as ‘a special type of tourism activity that brings together scientifically validated medical resources and services (including invasive and non-invasive treatments), including diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and disease prevention and management’ (UNWTO, 2008). Medical tourism includes medical and wellness activities and is based on motivations that aim to increase physical, mental and spiritual health levels (UNWTO, 2018). In this context, medical tourism includes purposes such as utilising preventive medical services, receiving therapeutic therapies and providing rehabilitation services (Brandao et al., 2021; Yilmaz & Aktas, 2020).

Although factors such as affordable costs, reduced waiting times, medical safety and trust, high quality services, and accessibility to certain treatments come directly to mind when talking about the drivers of medical tourism, based on previous research, it is clear that the motivations of medical tourists are more complex and varied (Gan & Frederick, 2011; Guy et al., 2014; Henson et al., 2014; Jaapar et al., 2017; Smith & Forgiione, 2007). For instance, Hanefeld et al. (2015) found that those who travel for treatment have four types of motivation: ‘availability, cost, expertise and cultural/familial’. Adams et al. (2015) reached four components in their research to determine the motivations of medical tourists: ‘personal seeking, interpersonal seeking, personal escaping, interpersonal escaping’. In

a research conducted in South Korea, it was found that the motivations of tourists are directly related to the quality of medical facilities (Lee et al., 2020). Although the main motivations of tourists are treatment and details related to treatment (economic, quality service, etc.), the results of the studies in the literature show that different factors can also be among the motivations of tourists for medical tourism.

While the body of knowledge supports that different factors play a role in the preferences of tourists beyond their treatment-oriented motivations, medical tourism not only meets the health needs of individuals with its multifaceted structure. It also stands out as a sector that contributes to the economic development of countries and leads to significant transformations in their sociocultural structures. The growth of the medical tourism sector is not only limited to meeting the health needs of individuals, but also has a significant economic and sociocultural impact on countries (Connell, 2013). In recent years, countries such as Thailand, India, Türkiye, Singapore, Malaysia, UAE and Czechia have come to the fore as the world's leading medical tourism destinations thanks to their advanced medical technologies, modern infrastructure and internationally accredited hospitals. These countries gain a competitive advantage in the global market by establishing modern healthcare infrastructures, hiring qualified healthcare professionals and offering healthcare services at affordable costs (Sultana et al., 2014). These countries have made strategic investments to attract medical tourism demand from around the world, and these investments in health and tourism have contributed greatly to their economies (Beladi et al., 2017; WTTC, 2019). Thus, medical tourism has become an important component of not only individual health goals but also of countries' economic growth strategies.

Adapting to technology and globalisation, Türkiye has become one of the leading countries in this field with investments in the health sector, strategic government policies and the capacity to provide world-class services (Turkish Strategy and Budget Presidency, 2024). Türkiye has become one of the leading countries in medical tourism, and state institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Health provide support for health tourism (Ates & Sunar, 2024). In 2019, the International Health Services Joint Stock Company was established to increase and organise Türkiye's medical tourism potential (ZSA Health, n.d.). Türkiye has strengthened its healthcare infrastructure with modern hospitals, state-of-the-art medical equipment and qualified healthcare personnel (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of

Communications, n.d.). These investments have enabled service delivery at international standards. Türkiye's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East provides ease of transportation for international patients (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Investment Office, n.d.).

On the other hand, it can be stated that hair transplant-related travels are part of medical tourism. Among the main motivations of medical tourism, factors such as access to cost-effective and high-quality treatments, benefiting from treatment centres with advanced technologies with professional assistance, avoiding long waiting times and the desire to be treated quickly also play a decisive role in hair transplantation operations (Khan, 2024). One of the factors underlying the rapid increase in hair transplant travel is globalisation and technological advances in the healthcare sector. Digital platforms make it easier for patients to share their experiences and learn about service providers in this field, which increases international patient flow (Hermes et al., 2020). At the same time, the fact that accredited healthcare organisations perform operations at global standards is another important factor that increases patient confidence and preferability (Alhajwajreh et al., 2023). Therefore, these trips can also be referred to as hair transplant tourism and continue to grow as a sub-sector integrated into the global healthcare system (Haleem et al., 2022).

### *Medical tourism and Türkiye*

Türkiye's growth in medical tourism has largely been driven by the government's reform and incentive policies in the health sector (Ates & Sunar, 2024). The Health Transformation Program, launched in the early 2000s to modernise healthcare services, laid an important foundation in this area (SESRIC, n.d.). The main objectives of the programme included the integration of public and private health services, improvement of health infrastructure and training of health personnel (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Health, n.d.). Various incentives and regulations have been introduced by the government to support medical tourism. The Ministry of Health supported medical tourism investments through the concept of 'Health Free Zones' and focused on increasing the number of internationally accredited hospitals (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade, n.d.). In addition to all these developments and initiatives, the increasing demand for hair transplantation worldwide and the growth in the market have been the components that have reinforced Türkiye's success in this sector (ProFue Clinic, n.d.).

Türkiye is among the top ten most preferred countries in the field of medical tourism worldwide (The Association of Turkish Travel Agencies, 2024). Especially in recent years, significant investments in medical infrastructure and the establishment of new hospitals have made Türkiye one of the most important destinations in this field (Cavmak & Cavmak, 2020). As the most preferred country for medical tourism in Europe, Türkiye has invested more than 30 billion dollars in hospital construction and health technologies in the last decade.

As of 2020, Türkiye welcomed more and more medical tourists, with more than 1 million 300 thousand arrivals in 2022. In 2023, it showed a significant increase and exceeded 1.5 million (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024). In addition, Türkiye earned 2,206 thousand dollars in 2022 and more than 3 million dollars in 2023 from medical tourists (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024). However, it is known that a significant portion of medical tourists come for hair transplantation operations.

Türkiye is one of the leading destinations preferred for hair transplantation worldwide, and this success is based on several factors. Firstly, Türkiye's successful application of modern techniques such as FUE (Follicular Unit Extraction) in hair transplantation operations is one of the reasons why it is preferred worldwide (Erdogan et al., 2020). The FUE technique is a minimally invasive procedure that is very popular due to its natural results and short recovery time (Sharma & Ranjan, 2019). Secondly, affordable cost advantage in hair transplant operations is one of the main reasons why medical tourists prefer Türkiye. The cost of hair transplant operations in Türkiye is much more affordable compared to similar operations in Europe and America, offering a balance of high quality and affordability (Kilavuz, 2018). This cost advantage makes Türkiye an attractive destination for medical tourism.

In addition, the comprehensive medical tourism services provided by clinics in Türkiye ensure that medical tourists have a comfortable experience during and after the operation. Many clinics offer VIP transfer services, luxury accommodation and comprehensive post-operative follow-up services. These services make Türkiye an attractive option not only in terms of aesthetic results but also in terms of overall travel and comfort.

Finally, another factor that reinforces Türkiye's position as one of the leading destinations for hair transplantation is that the country's clinics comply with world standards in healthcare certification and accreditation processes (Turkish Healthcare Travel Council [THTDC], n.d.). Clinics accredited by organisations such

as the Global Healthcare Travel Council (GHTC, n.d.) and Joint Commission International (JCI, n.d.) offer reliable and high-quality services to clients.

## Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to analyse the experiences of foreign visitors who come to Türkiye for hair transplantation in depth through online comments and to reveal their perceptions of clinics in Türkiye and the process they go through in all aspects. In this context, it is thought to contribute to the literature and the sector by revealing why visitors who prefer Türkiye for hair transplantation choose this country and which elements of the service they encounter. In this study, content analysis method, which is one of the qualitative research methods and frequently used by researchers to analyse customer experiences, was used (Atsiz et al., 2023; Ciki & Tanriverdi, 2023; Egeli et al., 2024).

For the purpose of the study, comments on the Trustpilot website were collected manually. The use of the Trustpilot website for data collection in this research is based on several reasons (Trustpilot, n.d.). First, Trustpilot is a global review platform where users share their experiences about products and services, and this platform offers a large amount of qualitative data on various sectors thanks to its large user base. In medical tourism-oriented services such as hair transplant operations, platforms such as Trustpilot, where visitors share their first-hand experiences, provide researchers with authentic and up-to-date information about customer experiences, their expectations from the process and the challenges they face. Secondly, the Trustpilot platform uses algorithms and trustworthiness verification processes that ensure that reviews are transparent and auditable. This prevents biased assessments. This is an important factor that increases data reliability in a scientific study. Finally, Trustpilot offers a global perspective to researchers and various sectors by hosting reviews on many industries and service providers around the world.

A total of 338 usable comments were received from 9 clinics offering this service in Türkiye. All of these comments were in English and comments made outside of English were excluded from the scope of the study. Only comments made in the last 3 years (2022–2024) were taken into consideration and the data collection process was collected in 1 week in October (10.10.2024–17.10.2024).

In this research, the content analysis process was carried out by two separate coders. Both coders analysed the data independently and then the codes

obtained were discussed until a common decision was reached. The differences that emerged between the coders were subjected to a detailed negotiation process and a final consensus was reached. This stage increased the reliability and accuracy of the data analysis and provided a solid foundation for the coding process. The discussion and evaluation processes allowed the data to be carefully analysed and classified, and categories agreed upon by both coders were created.

The researchers agreed on the final themes and their categories. Subsequently, two experts with extensive knowledge of healthcare and hair transplantation, the subject of the research, were asked to review the identified categories. As a result of the expert reviews, 18 categories and 6 main themes were approved. As a result, the main findings of the study were shaped around these themes.

## Results

After collecting the comments of customers who travelled for hair transplantation and shared their experiences on the Trustpilot website, the demographic characteristics of the customers who commented were analysed before the data obtained were subjected to content analysis and these results are presented in Table 1. It was determined that 47% of the total 338 comments obtained belonged to the year 2024. In addition, it was determined that male customers made the majority of comments with a rate of 95%. It was found that the majority of tourists travelling for hair transplantation rated their experience with the highest rating of five stars (93%). Finally, it was observed that a significant portion (35%) of the

customers who commented preferred not to share their country information.

Following the manual analysis of the demographic characteristics of tourists who commented on their hair transplant experiences, content analysis was conducted to reveal the components of the customer experience that make up the hair transplant experience. As a result of the manual content analysis, six components underlying the hair transplantation experiences of medical tourists were reached. These components are clinic and equipment quality, service quality, price-performance perception, transfer and accommodation services, fulfilment of expectations, follow-up processes (see Figure 1).

### Service quality

Service quality is one of the determinants of overall satisfaction in healthcare services and is a critical concept that has a direct impact on patient experience (Naik Jandavath & Byram, 2016). Clinics that provide high quality services create positive patient experiences by gaining the trust of patients. Quality in healthcare services is not only limited to technical skills, but also includes the communication skills of healthcare professionals with patients. Quality service delivery increases patient safety and satisfaction, creates patient loyalty and increases the competitiveness of clinics in the international arena. The categories that constitute the 'service quality' theme include the effective communication skills of the staff, the psychological support provided, the personalisation of services according to individual needs, and the convenience and comfort offered. Studies show that destinations or service providers with high service quality in tourism are preferred more frequently by tourists (Ogretmenoglu et al., 2023; Singh & Nika, 2019; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). In particular, Türkiye stands out worldwide with the high quality services it offers in the field of hair transplantation and continues its success in this field.

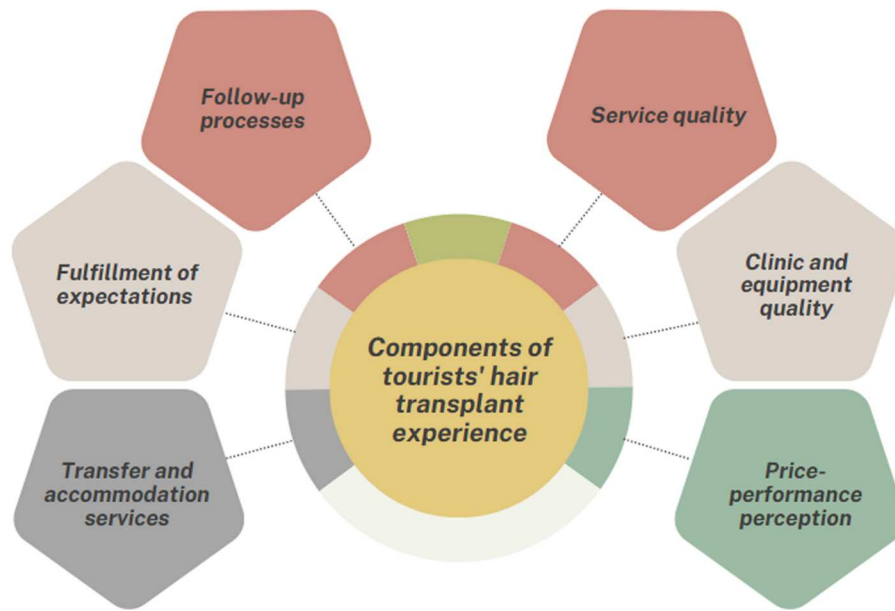
... Dr. and her team are true professionals who deliver outstanding results. Their expertise, compassion, and dedication to patient satisfaction are unparalleled ... (T79 Anonymous)

... The hospital team's professionalism, especially the doctors and the nurses, earned my utmost appreciation ... My translator, was not just friendly but exceptionally helpful. Her thorough explanations and accommodating nature made a significant difference ... (T53 from UK)

... Great service from the moment we arrived at the airport until the last moment we were served. Great staff and my translator was very helpful highly recommended ... (T280 Anonymous)

**Table 1.** Characteristics of hair transplant tourists.

Travellers Features	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	323	95.56
Female	10	2.96
Anonymous	5	1.48
<b>Comment Year</b>		
2024	159	47.04
2023	130	38.46
2022	49	14.50
<b>Rating/Stars</b>		
1	6	1.78
2	2	0.59
3	2	0.59
4	10	2.96
5	317	93.79
<b>Country</b>		
USA	108	31.95
UK	54	15.98
Canada	14	4.14
Other	43	12.72
Anonymous	119	35.21
<b>Total</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>100.00</b>



**Figure 1.** Components of the experience of tourists travelling for hair transplantation. Source: Created by the authors.

### **Clinic and equipment quality**

Clinical and equipment quality is vital for the efficiency and reliability of healthcare services (Zamzam et al., 2021). Modernity of medical equipment, adequacy of medical equipment and professionalism of the surgical environment are the categories that constitute this theme. In complex medical procedures such as hair transplantation, the technological level of the equipment used and the equipment of the clinic environment directly affect both the success of the operation and patient safety. In order to apply modern hair transplantation techniques, clinics must have advanced technology and meet high sterilisation standards. In this context, the success of techniques such as FUE (Follicular Unit Extraction) used in clinics is largely directly proportional to the quality of the equipment used (Anastassakis, 2023). Advanced equipment allows for minimally invasive procedures, accelerating patient recovery and minimising the risk of complications.

The fact that accredited clinics comply with international standards is an important factor that increases the preferability of these clinics. Accreditations from some leading organisations are an indication that clinics meet certain quality standards and prioritise patient safety. However, regular maintenance of equipment and the ability of healthcare staff to use it are also integral parts of quality healthcare delivery. High-quality clinics offer patients a safe and effective hair transplant experience by keeping both their technological infrastructure and the training level of their staff up-to-date.

... This is a fully equipped hospital! You are followed up for 1 year after the operation. I went to homeland and immediately after returning to my country, I was called by clinic for follow-up treatment ... (T38 from USA)

... Upon arrival, I must say that the clinic facility shocked me in a good way. It's very modern, certainly very clean and well equipped ... (57 from UK)

... This clinic is very clean and modern, they don't ask for money up front, only a little 10% deposit, rest is payable at the clinic. I think they use advanced technology to analyze your hair density in areas, where donor hair should be taken from for best results. You even get a report printed with close up pictures and graphs of your hair. They take many tests of your blood etc. They buzz and wash your head and draw lines with special equipment for best hairline that suits your face and balding type ... (T230 Anonymous)

### **Price-performance perception**

Price-performance perception is an important factor determining the competitiveness of service providers in medical tourism (Ye et al., 2012). In hair transplantation services, patients' evaluation of the balance between cost and service quality plays a critical role in their choice of clinic. Price-performance perception is not only limited to low cost, but also includes all factors such as the quality of the service provided, the success of the operation, the technology used and the post-operative support. Accommodation, transport and hair transplantation costs, price matching with results, transparency of fees, free additional services, comparison with other service providers are the categories of

this theme. Türkiye appeals to an international patient base with the affordable services it offers in the field of hair transplantation and provides a competitive advantage. The cost advantage offered by clinics in Türkiye is a very attractive alternative to the high prices in Western Europe and North America.

... I went from Canada here, in a long flight, but it was very worth it, first the prices was very good compared by the services and the quality that I had. Then all the procedure was so easy ... (T24 from Canada)

... I recommend strongly this clinic and at the moment I am very satisfied with the result! The coordinator takes care of you and everything spends as it was advisable in advance. Unbeatable value for money. Attractive price-performance ratio. Thanks (T34 from UK)

... The clinic prices I have chosen are not the cheapest, but you get what you pay for. The clinical evidence for reduced pain and swelling is overwhelming and this is very important ... (T327 from UK)

### *Transfer and accommodation services*

Within the scope of medical tourism, transfer and accommodation services are one of the critical components that have a significant impact on the customers' experience. Transfer services include processes such as welcoming customers from the airport, transporting them to clinics safely and comfortably, and transferring them to their accommodation after the operation. Welcoming the customer at the airport, organising hotel reservations, VIP transportation services and high quality accommodation facilities are among the categories that comprise the 'transfer and accommodation services' theme.

Medical tourists, especially those travelling for surgical procedures such as hair transplantation, attach great importance not only to the quality of the medical service, but also to the comfort and logistics services offered in the pre- and post-operative processes. In this context, the quality of transfer and accommodation services directly affects customers' satisfaction level and trust in the service provider. In addition, many clinics offer VIP transfer services, providing customers with a luxurious and personalised experience. Accommodation services are an important element that supports the post-operative recovery process. Since clients need to rest after the operation, comfortable and hygienic accommodation options provided by clinics positively affect the success of the recovery process and customer satisfaction.

... From the moment I arrived, I was treated like royalty. The VIP transfer service was amazing – it made my journey stress-free and comfortable. The hotel reservation arranged by the clinic was superb, ensuring I

had a relaxing stay before and after the procedure. (T12 from UK)

... I talked to the medical consultants and they explained to me all the details. And They was so kind, they send the vip transfer from the airport to hotel. The hotel was so nice. I had a very comfortable room. (T19 from UK)

... As a result, my experience was amazing in every aspect of the hair transplant surgery (3500 grafts using DHI in 1 session) and the trip. The accommodation and car services were also arranged with a lot of comfort in mind to make it a great experience. (T156 Anonymous)

### *Fulfilment of expectations*

Customer satisfaction in the service sector is directly related to the extent to which the service meets the expectations of individuals (Setó-Pamies, 2012). In the context of medical tourism, especially in aesthetic interventions such as hair transplantation, customer satisfaction is determined by the harmony between the expectations they set before the operation and their post-operative experiences. Fulfilling customers' expectations increases both physical and psychological satisfaction levels of customers, thus positively affecting the customer experience. The categories that enable the formation of the theme of 'fulfilment of expectations' are the naturalness of the result, reaching the targeted hair density, and the shortness of the waiting time for the results of the operation. In addition, some of the comments supporting this component are given below.

... Clinic exceeded my expectations at every step. The journey from the airport to the clinic was smooth, and the staff's hospitality was remarkable. The surgical procedure was conducted with care and expertise, and the follow-up care was comprehensive. A truly commendable experience ... (T16 from UK)

... I had an exceptional experience from the start, well before my arrival in Turkey. Consultant's unwavering support and guidance streamlined the entire process, making it remarkably smooth. The hotel and transportation exceeded expectations, and the breakfast buffet was a delightful ... (T52 from UK)

... I'm waiting for the results of the hair transplant but so far everything has exceeded my expectations. In conclusion, I wholeheartedly recommend this Clinic to anyone considering a hair transplant ... (T79 Anonymous)

### *Follow-up processes*

Another element that visitors emphasised the most is the importance of post-operative follow-up processes

after the operation. Postoperative guidance and follow-up are key components in ensuring successful outcomes in hair transplant operations. These processes include observing the client's health status, assessing wound healing, and conducting regular checks of the transplanted hair follicles to identify and address potential complications early. Effective follow-up processes help to streamline recovery, provide clients with necessary care instructions, and support the long-term success of the procedure. By ensuring comprehensive monitoring and regular communication, follow-up processes play a vital role in enhancing the overall experience and satisfaction of clients. Patient education and guidance, routine checks and feedback, communication and support services, health status monitoring are the categories of this theme.

The post-operative follow-up process is a critical stage in the successful outcome of the operation and ensuring customer satisfaction. In hair transplantation operations, meticulous post-operative care and control processes help to accelerate the healing process and minimise possible complications. Post-operative follow-up usually includes steps such as observing wound healing, monitoring the client's hair growth process and quickly identifying and eliminating potential problems in the transplantation area. In this process, it is of great importance to provide clients with care instructions that they should pay attention to after hair transplantation and to offer regular check-up appointments in order to increase satisfaction. Below are the comments of some guests who travelled for hair transplantation:

... Hair Clinic team, including the manager and medical assistants went above and beyond to ensure my comfort and satisfaction throughout the entire process. They are not only highly skilled but also incredibly compassionate, taking the time to thoroughly explain the procedure and address any concerns I had. The manager, was instrumental in coordinating every aspect of my visit, from scheduling appointments to arranging accommodations. Additionally, the medical assistants provided invaluable support, guiding me through pre-op preparations and post-op care with kindness and expertise ... (T18 from UK)

Being from a foreign country trust was very important in my decision making process. I have had 2 hair transplants done previously from a different country and therefore had a fair bit of knowledge. Hence, once I was contacted by my hair transplant consultant, Enki, I was able to ask good relevant questions to which she had great answers. She also explained the whole process in great detail from the itinerary to the drop-offs and pick-ups, graft count expectations (based on my photos), to the wash and post surgery consultations ... (T157 Anonymous)

... My medical consultant was excellent giving me all the info needed and always happy to answer all my questions, then medical consultant who is another excellent medical consultant continued assisting me and was in contact with me during the whole process making me feel safe and confident. (T165 Anonymous)

## Conclusion

This research aims to evaluate the experiences of international tourists who come to Türkiye for hair transplantation and the service quality they encounter in this process. In this context, tourists' perceptions of the services provided by the clinics were analysed through content analysis method based on the comments made on Trustpilot. As a result of the research, six main components that shape visitors' experiences were identified: service quality, clinic and equipment quality, price-performance perception, transfer and accommodation services, meeting expectations, feeling of trust before the operation and post-operative follow-up. The presence of these components indicates that hair transplantation operations are more than just a surgical procedure, they offer a multidimensional experience and each component of this experience has a significant impact on satisfaction. The findings of the research provide important insights into the need for a holistic approach to healthcare services.

It has been revealed that service quality is one of the main determinants of the experiences of tourists travelling for hair transplantation. Clinics that offer high quality service stand out with their technical skills and clinical equipment level; these features are among the factors that directly affect the success and reliability of the procedures. A significant portion of medical tourists who travel for hair transplantation and comment on their experiences emphasise the importance of service quality. Emphasising that they have entered a difficult and stressful process in another country, it has been observed that the behaviour of the staff they communicate with has a determining role for their experiences.

Clinic and equipment quality stands out as a critical component of hair transplant tourists' experience. This component plays a decisive role in the successful realisation of the operation, customer safety and satisfaction. High-quality clinics and advanced equipment facilitate the application of minimally invasive methods during the operation, accelerating the healing process and reducing the risks of complications. Providing a safe and comfortable environment using equipment that meets international quality standards is of utmost importance for hair transplant guests. This is an element that supports the psychological safety of the

clients as well as the physical healing process. Industry-wide, well-equipped and high-tech hair transplant clinics help to improve the customer experience and increase customer satisfaction.

Price-performance perception is a critical component, especially in sectors that focus on the balance between cost and quality, such as medical tourism. In the field of hair transplantation, customers evaluate the prices of clinics by considering the quality of service they offer, the success of the operation and the technology used, and prefer the centres that provide this balance in the best way. Türkiye shapes this perception positively by offering high quality services at affordable costs, especially compared to Western European and North American countries, and is an attractive destination that appeals to an international customer base. In a competitive sector such as hair transplantation, price-performance perception directly affects customers' choice of clinic. In this context, taking these findings into consideration is important for the sustainability of the business.

Transfer and accommodation services are among the critical components that significantly impact the overall customer experience in medical tourism sectors such as hair transplant tourism. Transfer and accommodation services are an important layer of customer value to ensure a comprehensive experience in medical tourism. Tourists travelling for hair transplant operations evaluate not only the quality of medical services, but also the comfortable transportation and accommodation services provided before and after the operation. In the hair transplant sector, transfer and accommodation services directly affect the ability of clinics to attract international customers.

Fulfilment the expectations of customers in the field of hair transplantation is one of the main components that directly affect the customer experience. Customers have certain expectations regarding pre-operative information, support throughout the process, post-operative care and various issues. The positive impact of the customer experience is directly proportional to the extent to which their expectations are met throughout the process. In this case, customers exhibit a higher level of satisfaction when they have an experience in line with their expectations, and when they are satisfied with this experience, they are more likely to prefer it again and give positive feedback.

Post-operative follow-up services are a critical element in supporting the client's recovery process and are therefore one of the most emphasised points. In this process, monitoring the client's health status, evaluating the wound healing process, and regular checks of the growing hair follicles ensure early detection of possible

complications. Additionally, the guidance offered during the follow-up process allows clients to optimise their post-procedure care. These follow-up measures are essential for accelerating the healing process, minimising risks, and improving overall customer satisfaction and the success of the procedure.

### *Theoretical implications*

The findings of the research offer some theoretical insights to the industry. By analysing the experiences of medical tourists travelling for hair transplantation, this research makes an important contribution to the medical tourism literature by providing a model of the dimensions of hair transplant tourists' experiences. The research reveals a multidimensional assessment of the experiences of hair transplant tourists.

This research offers an innovative approach that hair transplant tourism should be considered as a 'micro-travel experience'. The process of hair transplantation goes beyond an ordinary aesthetic intervention by creating a radical change in individuals' self-perception, social acceptance and physical appearance. In this context, the research draws attention to the fact that hair transplant tourism should be considered not only as a medical travel but also as an experience that contributes to the social and psychological reconstruction process of individuals.

Furthermore, this research shows that the hair transplantation process is shaped around a chain of trust model. The trust relationship established with the patient starting before the operation is reinforced by surgical success during the operation and continues with follow-up processes after the operation. It is revealed that when any link in this chain of trust is broken, the patient's overall perception of the experience can be severely damaged. Therefore, the research emphasises that the design of a patient journey that maintains a sense of trust in an uninterrupted manner is critical in the field of medical tourism.

### *Practical implications*

In addition to the theoretical implications of the research, there are also some practical implications. This research, which provides an understanding of the expectations of medical tourists from the hair transplantation experience process in line with online comments, provides guidance to clinics offering hair transplantation services and other stakeholders in the medical tourism sector in terms of structuring the pre- and post-operative processes in a professional manner. The research has shown clinic managers and decision makers in the sector

that strategies to evaluate the operation process as a whole and to sustain quality at every stage play an important role in customer experience and satisfaction. On the other hand, clinics that want to compete need to follow practices such as the use of high-quality equipment, international accreditations, digital tracking systems that prioritise customer experience, and regular staff training.

Finally, the present research argues that digital feedback in hair transplant tourism should be considered as 'modern patient-doctor dialog'. Online reviews and evaluations on social media stand out as tools through which patients not only evaluate the quality of clinical service, but also express the change they experience after treatment in a social context. These digital dialogues can be used as a new resource for clinics to improve their operation processes, provide more transparent information to potential patients, and respond to patients' emotional needs after the operation.

### Limitations and further studies

This research examined the experiences of hair transplant tourists using only online reviews. First of all, it is limited to a data set that is restricted to certain perspectives due to the fact that it is limited to customer reviews obtained only from online platforms. In future studies, in addition to comments on online platforms, different data collection methods such as face-to-face interviews and questionnaires can be used to address a broader perspective and a comprehensive analysis of customers' experiences can be realised. In addition, the components obtained as a result of this research can be used as a resource for applications for hair transplant tourists. In particular, in order to measure the effects of post-operative follow-up processes more objectively, surveys can be conducted to evaluate the satisfaction levels of customers before and after the operation. Finally, a research to develop different service standards for hair transplantation operations by comparing the experiences of customers from different cultural and demographic groups may contribute to the diversification of clinics serving in this field in the international market.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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