

Scrubbing up on-line: How best practice hospital websites can drive medical tourism

“Scrubbing up on-line”: cómo los sitios web de hospitales con mejores prácticas pueden impulsar el turismo médico

“Scrubbing up on-line”: como boas práticas de websites hospitalares podem impulsionar o turismo médico

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ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study explores how health institutions (i.e. hospitals) communicate through their corporate websites to convey reliability and credibility in order to establish relationships with users in the field of medical travel. The 10 world's leading medical tourism hospitals have been selected based on the International Medical Travel Quality Alliance (2019) ranking and their strategic online communication analyzed by applying framing theory. Methodologically, a content analysis was conducted of both websites and subsites which aimed specifically at medical tourists. We conclude that hospitals are in an embryonic phase in their communicative management model with their public in the field of medical tourism since they disregard the potential role of public relations. This article provides valuable and helpful information for both tourism and communication practitioners in medical tourism.

KEY WORDS

Health communication, Medical tourism, Public relations, Health tourism, Strategic communication.

Resumen:

Este estudio explora cómo las instituciones de salud (es decir, los hospitales) se comunican a través de sus sitios web corporativos para transmitir confiabilidad y credibilidad a fin de establecer relaciones con los usuarios en el campo de los viajes médicos. Los 10 hospitales de turismo médico líderes en el mundo han sido seleccionados en base a la clasificación del International Medical Travel Quality Alliance (2019) y su comunicación estratégica en línea analizada mediante la aplicación de la teoría del encuadre. Metodológicamente, se realizó un análisis de contenido tanto de los sitios web como de los subsitios que estaban dirigidos específicamente a turistas médicos. Concluimos que los hospitales se encuentran en una fase embrionaria en su modelo de gestión comunicativa con su público en el ámbito del turismo médico ya que desconocen el papel potencial de las relaciones públicas. El artículo proporciona información valiosa y útil para los profesionales del turismo y la comunicación en el área del turismo médico.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Comunicación sanitaria, Turismo médico, Relaciones públicas, Turismo sanitario, Comunicación estratégica.

Resumo

Este estudo explora como as instituições de saúde (ou seja, hospitais) se comunicam por meio de seus sites corporativos para transmitir confiabilidade e credibilidade a fim de estabelecer relacionamentos com usuários no campo de viagens médicas. Os 10 principais hospitais de turismo médico do mundo foram selecionados com base no ranking da International Medical Travel Quality Alliance (2019) e sua comunicação estratégica online analisada

pela aplicação da teoria dos quadros. Metodologicamente, foi realizada uma análise de conteúdo de sites e subsites voltados especificamente para turistas médicos. Concluímos que os hospitais estão em fase embrionária em seu modelo de gestão comunicativa com seu público no campo do turismo médico, uma vez que desconsideram o papel potencial das relações públicas. O artigo fornece informações valiosas e úteis para profissionais de turismo e comunicação na área de turismo médico.

Palavras-chave

Comunicação em saúde, Turismo Médico, Relaciones públicas, Turismo de saúde, Comunicación estratégica.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Shanghai Declaration (2016) emphasized that health and wellbeing are essential for sustainable development, being especially significant their role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (WHO, 2018). In a world as globalized and connected as the current one, these challenges take a new global dimension often forgotten: the growth of medical tourism. According to the Medical Tourism Association (MTA, 2019), medical tourism is “where people who live in one country travel to another county to receive medical, dental and surgical care.” Due to globalization, a growing number of patients are using the Internet and related technologies to gain access to health information and medical services (Kangas, 2010; Liu et al., 2020; Lu & Zhang, 2019; Lunt et al., 2012; MacReady, 2007; Snyder et al., 2011). As the World Health Organization (WHO) states, it is envisioned that medical travel will expand globally in the next decade (WHO, 2015). In the European Union, health tourism “is growing faster than tourism in general (...) largely due to

an ageing population and the patients right to be reimbursed in all EU countries regardless of their nationality” (Weston et al., 2019, p. 30; Ferrer-Roca, Weston, Guia, Mihalic, Blasco, Prats, Lawler, & Jarratt, 2020). Therefore, studying this increasing phenomenon is relevant, not only because of its potential to help implement the SDGs (Ferrer-Roca, Guia & Blasco, 2020).

Public relations applied to tourism and health represent a field of study which has kept many authors engaged in the past twenty years (Carretón & Feliu, 2011; Castillo-Esparcia & López-Villafranca, 2016; Fernández & Carretón, 2011; Fernández-Cavia & Huertas, 2014; Fernández Souto et al., 2016; Huertas, 2008; Marca et al., 2017; Oliveira, 2017; Oliveira & Huertas, 2019). In these studies, the analysis of the public and institutional strategic communication are considered essential, whereas public administration, international, national and local private companies interact, in order to organizing and designing common strategies to boost and promote this sector (Costa-Sánchez & Míguez-González, 2018; Huertas, 2008;

Heras-Pedrosa, 2018; Lunt et al., 2012; Marca et al., 2018; Marca-Francés et al., 2019; Mason & Wright, 2011; Mason et al., 2011; Oliveira, 2017). In addition, the dialogic communication that new technologies allow between health organizations and medical tourists entail direct implications for public relations (Capriotti et al., 2016; Heras-Pedrosa, 2018). This is the dimension explored in this study: how health institutions, specifically hospitals, communicate through their corporate websites to convey reliability and credibility in order to establish relationships with their potential medical tourism users.

Investigating medical travel is not an easy field of study (Helble, 2011; Kelley, 2013). There is no consensus regarding an international term which defines the people who travel abroad to receive medical treatment. Therefore, this leads to a lack of common methodology when collecting data, as it comes from different locations around the world. As a consequence, the calculation of the value of the world market of medical tourism is quite controverted. Some authors suggest medical tourism is a business which could have reached 16.7 billion dollars in 2018 (Mordor Intelligence, 2019), while others state that it is a 60 billion dollars a year business (MacReady, 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to note that pre-COVID tourism was the second fastest growing industry in the world (3.9%), while the third one was health (3.1%) (WTTC, 2019). It can be stated that tourism and health are very profitable strategic sectors worldwide.

The Internet plays a crucial role in public relations (Capriotti et al., 2016; Christ, 2007). For these authors, websites are institutional communication tools that enable dialogue. Such formula has been achieved after more than 20 years of progress, moving from only being informational and monological to becoming “instruments of social communication that

promote dialogue” (Capriotti et al., 2016, p. 1). Its relevance in any communication strategy is significant when the aim is to lead new users to a brand, product or institution, as well as whenever an interaction is required, namely, to establish a dialogue between these, direct or potential users, and the brand or institution.

Due to the nature of the service provided, medical institution websites are the display to make those facilities visible both at locally and internationally (Inci & Sancar, 2017; Lee et al., 2014). As Más Bleda and Aguillo (2015) state, part of the success of social websites as new communication media shall be attributed to their capacity to promote research, but also to their capacity to provide metrics capable of measuring the impact of their social influence.

Previous studies have focused on how hospitals communicate (Costa-Sánchez, 2012; Medina Aguerrebere, 2012; Santellán et al., 2021), including their social media management and engagement (González et al., 2021). A review of the literature conducted by Santellán et al. (2021) concludes that there are four main axes of communication for good hospital communication: communication tools, communication strategies, communication characteristics, and digital skills.

It should not be forgotten that medical organizations, besides being vital services providers, have an evident interest in conveying reliability and credibility to draw new patients. Therefore, they need to be strategic in the elaboration of the messages that appear on their websites (Mason & Wright, 2011). More and more people are looking for information online, not only in terms of medical tourism, but also information about health in general (Jun, 2016), and even more after the COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, the messages obtained through the websites of official institutions can play a relevant

role when it comes to choosing a destination for medical tourism.

In addition, most countries receiving this sort of tourism are not developed countries. Hence, medical tourism can contribute to increase the level of life of the locals by providing, for instance, incomes that could allow them to have access to education or better medical services; similar to the case of cultural tourism with the intermediation of the corresponding government (Wineaster, 2015).

In this context, this study aims to examine the information shared on the websites of the top 10 medical tourism hospitals. It seeks to observe how hospitals manage their official websites to convey trust, that is, how they highlight reliability and credibility, relevant relational components to attract potential users of medical tourism from other countries. This relationship contributes to building the reputation of health centers with their public and generates reliability for patients, users and medical tourists.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Mason and Wright (2011, p. 164), the Framing Theory offers a “useful theoretical framework for investigating medical tourism websites” since, as Entman (1993, p. 52) states, it helps selecting “some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation”. In other words, framing refers to “how the media report on a topic or present an issue, thereby influencing public perceptions and opinions about the issue” (Park & Reber, 2010, p. 40). As expected, media assign certain meanings to issues “highlighting some aspects

of the information while omitting others” (ibid.). And, consequently, this influences how people think and act regarding certain topics (Capriotti & Losada-Díaz, 2018; Lu & Zhang, 2019; Luarn et al., 2015; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Therefore, this methodological view facilitates the analysis of the online dialogue established by the hospitals of the sample with their international public and, at the same time, it allows us to observe whether this communication gives reliability and credibility to the medical institutions of the study.

The studies conducted until now about communication and health, and some directly related to medical tourism, have used Framing Theory (Bardhan, 2002; Lee et al., 2014; Mason & Wright, 2011; Park & Reber, 2010). On the one hand, because media (i.e., websites of the hospitals) are a convenient and reliable source of information about health. On the other, because they have “a significant impact on the public understanding of health issues, as well as on their health-related behavior” (Park & Reber, 2010, pp. 40-1).

Therefore, this study applies Framing Theory in its analysis following the research of Mason and Wright (2011) and Lee et al. (2014). Mason and Wright (2011) used it to examine how tourism websites inform in terms of an array of items: appeal, risk, convalescence, accreditation and interactivity and their sample was selected from a randomized search on the Internet. On the other hand, Lee et al. (2014) also used Framing Theory to analyze the communicational features used on the website of intermediaries.

Thus, our study is interdisciplinary in the areas of tourism, communication, health, and innovation. First, it provides an analysis based on public relations in an area that, in general, is examined from a marketing perspective which misses some of the nuances, in both language

and meaning (Topler, 2017) of the public relations discipline. Second, it provides valuable and helpful information for tourism and communication practitioners in medical tourism, which is even more relevant after the global COVID-19 pandemic. Third, it does not use a randomized sample, nor it focuses on the websites of intermediaries, but instead it analyses the online strategical communication of the 10 main world medical tourism hospitals (81 sites) according to the international ranking of the Medical Travel Quality Alliance (MTQA, 2019). The results should allow to understand how the content items published on the medical websites analyzed collaborate to generate reliability among the potential hospital users (Viñarás-Abad, 2013). In this way, we will check if the contents of the websites: 1- choose to provide a wide scope of information about the capacity of the institutions; 2.- create communication channels which allow bidirectionality, and 3.- select spokesmen who generate credibility.

3. METHODOLOGY

The general objective of the study is “to determine the main communication elements used on the websites of the leading medical tourism hospitals in order to attract potential international users”. Considering the theoretical approach and in order to achieve it, two research questions were formulated: *What kind of communication resources do the main 10 hospitals of medical tourism use on their websites? and What are the resources available on the websites of the hospitals to convey reliability and credibility to potential users around the world?*

Before collecting data, we defined the home website as the main unit of analysis, as well as the subsections specifically aimed at international visitors. Initially, it was discovered that the home page offered limited information for

medical tourism. Therefore, we focused our analysis on the sub-websites which specifically addressed medical tourists or offered relevant information to this sort of patients. In total, 81 pages were analyzed according to the following table:

Table 1

Hospitals and number of websites analyzed

Ranking	City, Country	Name of the hospital	Number of websites analyzed
1	Beirut, Lebanon	Clemenceau Medical Centre	6
2	Istanbul, Turkey	Anadolu Medical Centre	13
3	Amman, Jordan	The Specialty Hospital	5
4	Hamburg, Germany	Asklepios Klinik Barmbek	5
5	Bangkok, Thailand	Samitivej Hospital	15
6	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Prince Court Medical Centre	7
7	Toronto, Canada	Shouldice Hospital	5
8	Singapore	Cleneagles Hospital	12
9	Tel Aviv, Israel	Loewenstein Rehabilitation Hospital	5
10	Prague, Czech Republic	Pronto Therapy Centre	8
		Total	81

Source: Own elaboration, ranking from Medical Travel Quality Alliance (MTQA, 2019).

The Medical Travel Quality Alliance ranking (MTQA, 2019) was selected to identify the sample and access the data of the 81 websites and subsites analyzed of the 10 leading medical tourism hospitals of the world. The MTQA is an independent international organization that develops and promotes the highest standards

Table 2

Variables analyzed

Research Questions	Variables	Dimensions
<p>1. What kind of communication resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Textual - Communication Resources: Video, Audios, Photographs, Hypertexts (links) <p>do the main 10 hospitals of medical tourism use on their website?</p>	Languages	What languages are used to provide information related to medical tourism on the websites of the hospitals selected, as well as whether they explicitly offer multilingual translators for their patients.
	Assistance with the travel	Whether they offer travel-related services, such as accommodation assistance with the hotel and/or visa, air ambulance, pick-up and transport to the airport, and whether tourism visits are also organized or whether specific packages of health and leisure are offered for patients and/or caregivers.
	Communication channels available (unidirectional and bidirectional)	In what way can users contact the hospital: email, online forms, telephone, whether there is a section for international patients and/or a department of public relations for foreign patients, online chat, blog, podcast, videos, and whether there are social networks like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or Instagram.
	<p>2. What are the resources available on the websites of the hospitals to convey reliability and credibility to potential users around the world?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To keep a dialogue with users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virtual visits Newsletters Links to share - To convey reliability and credibility 	Credibility and reliability
Benefits		Whether general benefits of medical tourism are mentioned: fewer expenses, quality service, opportunity to travel, customized service, professional medical experience, cutting-edge technology, or less waiting time.
Risks		Whether hospitals mention the potential post-surgery complications, the risk associated to the procedure and the legal proceedings.

Source: Own elaboration base don Capriotti, Carretón and Casteillo (2016), Mason and Wright (2011), and Lee et al. (2014).

of excellence in delivering treatment and care to medical tourists. It was created in Budapest in 2009 during the 2nd European Congress on Health Tourism as a response to the vast requests from hospital managers and facilitators of medical travels for a better understanding of

the protocols of special healthcare and the management of medical travelers.

The pattern of analysis used to determine the results in terms of strategic communication was a content analysis based on an ad hoc model created using three preceding studies. The

study was conducted between May and August 2019. In order to analyze the typology of communication resources used by hospitals, there is partial use of the method Capriotti et al. used in 2016 when they tested the level of interactivity of the websites of the most relevant art museums of the world. The variables of analysis associated to the healthcare field were based on the ones developed by Mason and Wright (2011, p. 171) and Lee et al. (2014, p. 643) in their studies about the framing of medical tourism websites.

Table 2 below shows how variables were used to answer each research question. Each dimension was coded either as 'present' or 'absent' (Tabla 2).

This is an exploratory study since it has analyzed 81 websites of the 10 leading hospitals worldwide in the field of medical tourism, as mentioned earlier, but it was not able to comprise the perspective of the users of the medical service.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding available media to interact with their patients, 90% (n=9) of the centers analyzed have an email address available for queries, and 70% (n=7) have an online registration form. Those which do not have an email, offer an online form and 60% (n=6) have both communication methods to ensure direct contact. All hospitals provide a contact phone number for consultations and 70% (n=7) have a specific section of services for international patients. However, only the Jordan Hospital (10%, n=1) has a public relations department addressed to both Arab and foreign patients (Figure 1).

It is interesting to note that none of the health institutions analyzed create podcasts and only 20% (n=2) of hospitals have a blog (Beirut and Singapore) and an online chat for direct queries

Figure 1

Department of Public Relations for Arab and Foreign Patients



Source: The Specialty Hospital in Amman, Jordan.

(Thailand and Singapore). The latter allows a bi-directional and immediate interaction between the patient and the hospital. On another note, it is also remarkable that none of the hospitals take into consideration the cultural specificities of their potential users, thus, do not adapt their communication strategies accordingly.

Regarding credibility and reliability, the results indicate that all hospitals analyzed (100%, n=10) have an official logo that is clearly identifiable on their website. In addition, 80% of healthcare institutions (n=8) are specialized in a medical procedure in particular and it is clearly explained. For instance, Anadolu Medical Centre of Istanbul (Turkey) specializes in oncology, the Hospital of Amman (Jordan) specializes in kidneys and cardiovascular diseases, Shouldice Hospital of Toronto (Canada) specializes in hernias and the Proton Therapy Centre of Prague (Czech Republic) in cancer. Furthermore, 70% of hospitals (n=7) have an accreditation or a renowned international certification and 80% (n=8) share testimonials of real patients. In most cases, the testimonials are recorded in videos (70%, n=7), and in one case (Proton Therapy Centre, Prague, Czech Republic) are only textual (10%, n=1). On the other hand, the lack of videos on websites is noteworthy. The compendiums of the presence in the press tell users of any institution about its quality or its renowned nature, just to mention some examples. In this case, only Gleneagles Hospital of

Singapore offers a compilation of its appearances in all sort of media (10%, n=1). However, in half of the cases (50%, n=5), hospitals have a news section, but these are press releases written by the hospital.

In terms of the emphasis on the benefits of the medical procedures, as expected, all hospitals emphasize their quality and customized service, and indicate the high professional experience of their doctors (100%, n=10). Half of hospitals analyzed mention the cutting-edge technology used in their surgeries (50%, n=5). However, less than half mention travel opportunities (40%, n=4) as a benefit to choose their hospital for medical treatment. Also, less than half emphasize the fast service as a benefit with hardly any waiting list (40%, n=4) and the lower costs of their medical procedures compared to other places around the world (10%, n=1).

Messages focusing on medical risks are a minority. Less than half mention the possible post-surgery complications (40%, n=4), the potential legal problems are only mentioned in 30% (n=3) of the websites, while none of them mention the possible risks of the procedures (n=0). In relation to the post-surgery services, which are a crucial element that may lead to a decision in this field of study, only 20% (n=2) of hospitals analyzed offer clear information about the post-surgery process after intervention. These were the hospitals on Canada and Czech Republic. The case of the Proton Therapy Centre in the Czech Republic is noteworthy since it is the only one that clearly offers a special and thorough service on how to monitor a post-surgery process remotely.

In this way, despite the great potential that corporate websites have to generate reliability and credibility towards potential patients, hospitals are missing the opportunity to create a communicational strategy for this purpose based

on a core element of public relations: risk management, whose relevance has been recalled by the global COVID-19 pandemic. They do not publish information, nor offer specific contact details given the case a post-surgery communication is needed, which would often be conducted in a remote manner (usually, patients return to their place of origin once they have received treatment, hence it is indispensable).

On another note, only a third of hospital websites analyzed introduce the destination from a tourism perspective. Therefore, hospitals in general choose to implement an individualistic communication strategy of their own business brand, instead of using a more cooperative communicative effort among all tourism organizations located in the same destination (Huertas, 2008; Fernández-Cavia & Huertas, 2014). Thus, they are missing the opportunity to generate synergies with local tourism companies, which aligns with the conclusion reached by Juan and Yingchuan (2020) in their study about the impact of the great sports events in local public. Regarding reputation, only one hospital, Gleneagles Hospital in Singapore, offers a compilation of its presence on both national and international media. The fact that healthcare centers do not include their media presence as a sign of recognition and prestige is noteworthy, as well as not using it as an element to generate engagement with users or to entice new future patients.

From a communication perspective, 30% of the websites can be identified as high quality or professional websites (n = 3), as they offer a very good communicative online strategy. On a second group, we find those that can be considered as intermediate level websites, which offer good communication tools but have potential to be improved. These represent the majority of the case studies analyzed (60%, n = 6). Finally, there is one website (10%, n = 1) that has

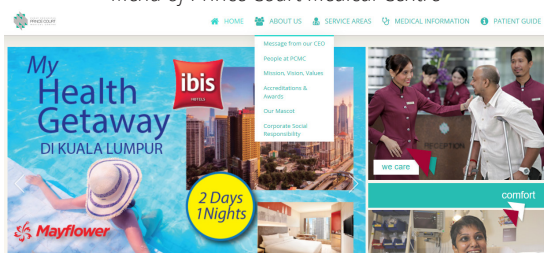
high deficiencies and has fewer elements that generate confidence based on the proposal of Viñarás-Abad (2013). This is the Asklepios Klinik Barmbek hospital in Hamburg, Germany. Their website is presented in German and offers an English subpage for international users, which is difficult to locate. In addition, it is the only one that does not offer email as a means of communication and does not have an international patient services section or public relations department. Neither does it inform about the destination or offer help to organize the trip.

Contrarily, the Prince Court Medical Centre of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is the medical center which best fosters its communicational relationship with its international patients considering the services associated to public relations. First, its website is directly presented in English and the public relations department offers “tailored” care. For example: “If you prefer, we can also create a tailor-made program to suit any specific need.” It promises assistance in terms of tourism organization of the trip, thus offering steward services for international clients and, in addition, it provides all the standard communicational protocols as shown on Figure 2 of the menu where the hospital introduces itself.

It is interesting to note that the 10 best hospitals worldwide in this field opt for the website as the main communication channel with their public, and that the common element for contact is still the telephone. The use of networks which would allow to consolidate bidirectional interaction with users, thus increasing a level of reliability of hospitals with their public (Capriotti et al., 2016; Costa-Sánchez & Míguez-González, 2018), is certainly restricted. Moreover, it indicates that healthcare centers use somewhat disparaged communication elements. In this sense, all hospitals use graphic resources (pictures) to share their content (Capriotti & Losada-Díaz, 2018; Luarn et al., 2015), but no case showed immersive videos of “360° visit”, nor surveys for users to express their level of satisfaction with the service. Remarkably, only three of the 81 sites studied allowed to share content and none considers the cultural specificities of the potential users in order to adapt their communication strategies accordingly.

Figure 2

Menu of Prince Court Medical Centre



Source: Website of Prince Court Medical Centre of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The evidence of the touristic offer supported in collaboration with the International Hotel chain Ibis is noteworthy.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has explored how health institutions (i.e., hospitals) communicate through their corporate websites to convey reliability and credibility to establish relationships with users in the field of medical travel. The Framing Theory has illustrated that, in general, the main healthcare centers analyzed miss the opportunity to properly use the many possibilities of their corporate websites to build a reality that adds value, imprints personality and helps to make them unique and distinguishable. Although in some cases hospitals do use simple infographics to make a complex surgical procedure accessible,

like the Jordan-based Specialty Hospital. The dialogue between centers and patients could be better implemented, as well as the cultural specificities of the potential users could be considered. Such dialogic elements would contribute to improve awareness and to disseminate their singular values in a professional field which is quite competitive. This study indicates that hospitals are undergoing an embryonic phase in the communicative management model with their publics in the field of medical tourism, a field which may entail an opportunity for public relations professionals specially after the global COVID-19 pandemic.

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