Connecting with prospective medical tourists online: A cross-sectional analysis of private hospital websites promoting medical tourism in India, Malaysia and Thailand

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Websites of private hospitals promoting medical tourism in India, Malaysia and Thailand is examined.
- The content and format of 51 hospitals across five dimensions analyzed.
- Results provide pointers for hospital managers to improve their online presence.

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ABSTRACT

Websites of private hospitals promoting medical tourism are important marketing channels for showcasing and promoting destinations’ medical facilities and their array of staff expertise, services, treatments and equipment to domestic and foreign patient-consumers alike. This study examines the websites of private hospitals promoting medical tourism in three competing Asian countries (India, Malaysia and Thailand) in order to look at how these hospitals present themselves online and seek to appeal to the perceived needs of (prospective) medical tourists. The content and format of 51 hospitals are analyzed across five dimensions: hospital information and facilities, admission and medical services, interactive online services, external activities, and technical items. Results show differences between Indian, Malaysian and Thai hospital websites, pointing to the need for hospital managers to improve their hospitals’ online presence and interactivity.

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1. Introduction

Medical tourism has attracted significant attention in recent years owing to the growing number of people from upper-income countries travelling to lower- and middle-income countries for healthcare (Behrman & Smith, 2010; Keckley, 2008). The internet, widely appreciated as an increasingly important source of health and healthcare information, has played a significant role in the development of the medical tourism industry (Hohn & Snyder, 2015; Huang & Chang, 2012; Lunt, Hardey, & Mannion, 2010; Maifredi et al., 2010). Patients in the United States, for example, use the Internet not only to gather general health information (Von Knoop et al., 2003) but also to identify the specific types of medical services available in hospitals at home and abroad (Grigoroudis, Litos, Moustakis, Politis, & Tsironis, 2008; Taylor, Gombeski, & Dillon, 2005). As such, the Medical Tourism Association (2009) found that 49% of the American medical tourists it surveyed learned about medical tourism via the internet and 73% sought specific information online about care abroad prior to going abroad. Such web use attests to the growing active participation of users/consumers, better informed than ever before, in caring for their own health and that of their families.

While studies suggest that high-quality online information is