



Research Article

The Convergence of Marketing and Consumer Behaviour in Medical Tourism

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Abstract

Medical Tourism is a major global industry driven by patients seeking timely, cost-effective, and specialised healthcare services across borders. This study examines the close relationship between marketing strategies and consumer behaviour in the medical tourism sector. Due to the digital transformation, which has impacted every industry, marketing approaches must continually shift from traditional advertising methods to digital marketing and social media marketing. Digital marketing plays a vital role in improving the visibility and performance of medical tourism companies. Innovative digital marketing strategies are crucial not only for attracting a larger patient base but also for nurturing sustainable relationships with clients. Furthermore, aligning marketing and communication is a prerequisite for enhanced patient engagement and retention.

From the consumer's perspective, several factors influence their choices, including cost considerations, perceived service quality, and the reputation of healthcare providers. Therefore, by analysing these elements, this study aims to identify marketing strategies that meet consumer expectations.

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KEYWORDS: Medical tourism, healthcare services, marketing strategies, consumer behaviour, digital transformation, social media campaigns, influencer marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

Medical tourism, also known as health tourism, refers to travelling across international borders to access healthcare services, including elective procedures and surgeries. Medical Tourism constitutes twin sectors- the medical industry and the tourism industry, which not only brings foreign exchange to the country but also leads to the generation of employment opportunities. Many patients travel cross-border to avail themselves of treatments and procedures that are unavailable in their home country. Whereas, some patients indulge in medical tourism due to lower relative cost and to avoid long waiting times for medical procedures.

Singh, S. (2016) Major tourist destinations for medical tourism are Thailand, India, Mexico, Turkey, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, and Costa Rica, offering affordable services, high quality, and skilled specialists. In India, medical tourists hail from the Middle-East, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Europe, Afghanistan, Turkey and the United States of America (USA). The services offered by Medical Tourism are categorised into wellness tourism, cosmetic surgery, alternative systems of medicine, and advanced and life-saving healthcare.

India is one of the most attractive destinations for medical tourism due to the availability of affordable and high-quality medical services compared to most developed nations. Additionally, it has a large number of tourist destinations, further contributing to the growth of the medical tourism industry.

According to a report by Fortune Business Insights, the market size of the medical tourism industry is estimated to grow at a CAGR of 23% from USD 38.20 billion in 2025 to USD 162.80 billion in 2032.

A study by the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management identified the major concerns of medical tourists at three stages: pre-procedure, procedure, and post-procedure. The major concerns of medical tourists at the pre-procedure stage include treatment quality, connectivity, treatment costs, accessibility, and ease of payment. At the procedure stage, the competence of doctors and staff, the management of the hospital, and care during the procedure are the major concerns. Post-procedure monitoring and follow-up, including ease in the settlement of bills, are the main concerns at the post-procedure stage.

Figure-1: Value-chain in medical

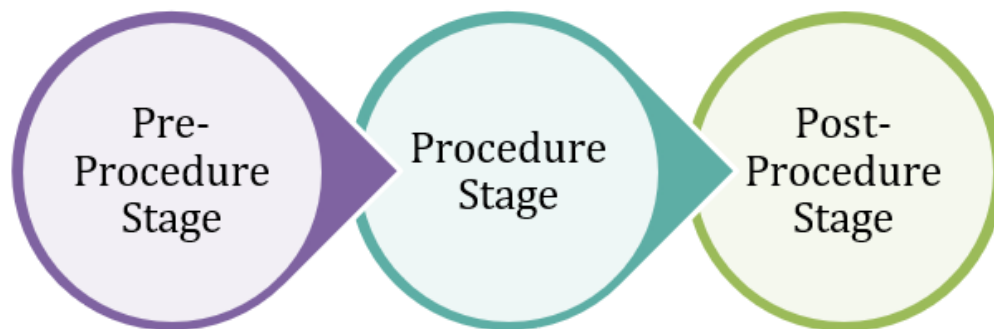


Figure-2: Elaborated value-chain

Pre-Procedure Stage	Procedure Stage	Post-Procedure Stage
Source of Information (Friends, Doctors, Insurance Agent, Internet, Advertisements, etc.) Facilitation (Hospital, Medical Tour Operator) Mode of Payment (Self-financed, Government Sponsored, Medical Insurance) Logistics	Pre-medical check up Treatment at Hospital	Monitoring for complications Progress Check Follow up care Post-treatment leisure (if desired by patient) Dues Clearance and return to home

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To ascertain the factors influencing the choice of a medical tourism destination.
2. To identify the various digital marketing strategies to attract prospective consumers.
3. To examine the role of communication in attracting and retaining consumers in medical tourism.

3. DISCUSSIONS OF THE STUDY

3.1 Factors influencing the choice of medical tourism destination

Çapar, H., & Aslan, Ö. (2020), in their paper, identified six factors affecting Destination choice, namely Quality of care, Safety and security, Potential for saving, Tourism Opportunities, Hygiene level, and Accessibility. Quality of care encompasses safety, effectiveness, timeliness, professionalism, and patient-centricity of the treatment when a person visits a healthcare facility for medical reasons. The safety and Security dimension encompasses medical safety, Physical/Personal safety, data security, legal protection, and ethical security. The potential for saving is another important factor influencing the choice of medical tourism, which refers to the total savings a patient can achieve by travelling abroad in terms of surgery costs, accommodation costs, medication costs, diagnostic costs, follow-up costs, and travel costs. Tourism Opportunities play a significant role in choosing a destination for medical tourism, allowing for a combination of leisure and treatment. This enhances the overall medical travel experience. Hygiene level is a crucial factor in medical tourism as it impacts the safety of patients, boosts confidence, ensures recovery, and integrates global standards. Accessibility as a factor of medical tourism includes easy visa procedures, geographical accessibility, language accessibility, cultural accessibility, digital accessibility and Cost accessibility.

3.2 Digital Marketing Strategies to attract prospective consumers

Digital Marketing is not just the art but also the science of promoting the products, brands and services using online platforms. It includes a vast range of strategies to attract prospective consumers in the digital space. Digital marketing is increasingly becoming an integral part of business operations.

The following are the major digital marketing strategies in the area of medical tourism-

1. **Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)-** Almukhtar, Mahmood, & Kareem. (2021) SEO is a mechanism by which the visibility of a website or web page is improved to generate more traffic from search engines. When SEO is effectively used, it results in increased appearance of the web page on the search engine result page (SERP). Google is the most popular search engine. Strategies like identification of keywords used by international patients, using these keywords in the contents of the website, website optimisation, backlink building, multilingual support, content marketing, and targeted advertising are the most effective strategies to attract international patients.

2. **Content Marketing-** SEO is highly influenced by effective content marketing. SEO requires keywords for its functioning, which are provided by content marketing. However, quality content is of utmost importance than the quantity of content provided to the target audience. The goal of content marketing should be to build trust and to provide some value to the target customers by providing blog posts on medical procedures, visa guidance, recovery experience, testimonial videos of patients, comparison of cost structure and visa guidelines and explaining the treatment process through infographics.
3. **Social media marketing-** Ravi et al. (2021) Social media marketing gives power to the people to attract prospective consumers through online social networks like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, for advertising their products, services, websites and brands. The tactics include Live Q&A sessions with the doctors, sharing behind-the-scenes videos, and using hashtags like #internationaltourism #medicaltourism, etc.
4. **Teleconsultation Integration-** Cecilio and Reis (2020) Medical teleconsultation makes use of various technologies and platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet, etc., to mediate the communication between doctors and patients located in varying geographical places. However, the shortcomings of teleconsultation include the inability to perform a physical examination, so it is not suited for the first consultation.
5. **Influencer Marketing-** Medical Tourism Magazine (n.d.) explains that Influencer marketing is an innovative marketing strategy that involves partnering with influential individuals with a large number of followers on social media. Medical tourism providers can increase brand awareness and exhibit their healthcare facilities to international patients by collaborating with influencers. It can be used effectively by educating the patients regarding medical procedures, treatments, and travel logistics, as well as by sharing testimonials of patients.
6. **AI-powered chatbots-** Lamba, D. (2023) Chatbots provide 24/7 support to the medical tourists seeking answers to their numerous queries regarding medical procedures, treatment and travel costs, appointment scheduling and rescheduling, etc. on a real-time basis. This leads to enhanced patient experience regardless of differences in time zone and language barriers.

3.3 Role of communication in attracting and retaining consumers in medical tourism

Effective communication is the key to the success of any organisation, and all the more important in the era of internationalisation to overcome the challenges thrown up by multicultural and multilingual settings. This will foster collaboration and relationship building. Various channels of communication adopted in medical tourism are websites, blogs, social media platforms, email marketing, chatbots for instant communication, online reviews and testimonials.

3.3.1. For Attracting Consumers

Effective communication (online and offline) facilitates awareness by providing information related to the availability and affordability of services. It fosters trust building and credibility by communicating about accreditations and certifications, as well as collaboration with other hospitals. Communication is also a medium of providing information about special packages, introduction of new technology, legal risks, rights and safety standards.

3.3.2. For Retaining Consumers

A strong communication network will assist in pre-treatment answers to the queries with multilingual support, clarity, and confidence about the procedures during the treatment, post-treatment follow-up, and encouragement of word-of-mouth referrals.

Suggestions

Medical Tourism is a thriving industry with significant scope for future growth. It can grow tremendously if new and innovative approaches are employed, including-

1. Principle of Transparency by developing user-friendly websites, AI-powered live chat support and virtual tours.
2. Consumer-centric communication by overcoming language barriers, clear dissemination of risks and outcomes.
3. Leverage word-of-mouth by sharing patient testimonials and collaborating with influencers.
4. Investing in pre- and post-treatment support by offering teleconsultation services and comprehensive aftercare plans.
5. Personalisation of medical tourism experience based on the preferences of the patients and incorporating CRM systems.
6. Staff training for cross-cultural competencies and assignment of cultural liaison offers.

4. CONCLUSION

Understanding consumer behaviour is pivotal for the sustainable growth of the medical tourism industry. The perceived motivations, risks and service expectations are largely influenced by increasingly informed and tech-savvy patients. Factors such as word-of-mouth influence, digital and AI-driven communication, and post-treatment follow-up play an important role in influencing consumer choice.

However, integration of sustainable practices, technology and consumer-centric innovations is essential to remain competitive in the fast-changing landscape of medical tourism. A deeper understanding of consumer behaviour and intentions in this area will not only enhance the quality of service delivery but will also strengthen the global reputation of medical tourism hubs.

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