

Marketing the (idealized) male body? Communication strategies of Thai cosmetic hospitals

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Abstract

This study investigates the communication strategies which Thai cosmetic hospitals pursue to market their services to international male clients. The investigation is predicated upon Taylor's six-segment message strategy model. Methodologically, corpus-assisted discourse analysis is employed, by qualitatively examining texts containing statistically significant keywords. The corpus consists of the English-version webpages belonging to 20 Thai hospitals with a total number of 73,168 words. Findings indicate that, in the absence of the routine strategy, the ego, social, sensory, acute needs, and ration strategies are implemented. Recommendations on how to improve communication strategies within the healthcare sector are offered.

Keywords : Corpus-assisted discourse analysis, cosmetic surgery, marketing communications, six-segment message strategy model, Thailand.

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0. Introduction

Cosmetic surgery refers to “a subspecialty that is concerned primarily with the maintenance, restoration, or enhancement of an individual’s physical appearance through surgical and medical techniques” (Swami et al., 2009, p. 7). Its enormous influence is generally recognized. Globally, the market size exceeded USD 26.3 billion in 2016 and is projected to reach USD 43.9 billion by 2025 (Grand View Research, 2017a, 2017b).

Despite the presence of international competitors such as South Korea (Kim, Lee and Jung, 2013), Singapore and India (Teh, 2007), Thailand remains one of the market leaders in cosmetic surgery (Connell, 2006b; Holliday *et al.*, 2015). It is internationally ranked among the top ten countries performing the largest proportion of the popular surgical procedures including breast augmentation, eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, liposuction and abdominoplasty, along with popular non-surgical procedures including botulinum toxin, hair removal, photo rejuvenation, hyaluronic acid and non-surgical fat reduction (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2018a).

Since it is required by law that cosmetic surgery be conducted in authorized medical establishments, cosmetic hospitals play a crucial role in communicating with clients. Such communication is also associated with building brand image and trust which influence their decision-making process (Cham, Lim & Sigala, 2021). In this context, ‘clients’ can refer to (1) prospective clients who are seeking information about cosmetic surgery and (2) existing clients who are considering additional services. Regarding prospective clients, hospitals engage in external marketing communications to attract them, create brand awareness and build a good reputation (Levin & Goldstein, 2018). Additionally, hospitals engage in internal marketing communication to ensure that existing clients remain active in purchasing additional services and referring others (Levin & Goldstein, 2018). Given a wide range of communication channels, online platforms are a functional mechanism for marketing transnational healthcare (Turner, 2012). All in all, this study intends to investigate the communication strategies which Thai hospitals employ on their websites to market cosmetic surgery services.

A good deal of research has examined issues about cosmetic surgery which targets female clients (e.g. Hopner & Chamberlain, 2020). Alternatively, some have explored those issues with a focus on plastic surgeons (e.g. Ahn *et al.*, 2013). Hence, to gain a

broader perspective, this paper extends the existing literature by concentrating on cosmetic surgery which is particularly targeted at male clients, while the service provider in focus is cosmetic hospitals.

Male clients are worth investigating because they are not a small segment. Recent global statistics indicate that they account for 12.6% of the entire cosmetic procedures (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2018b). This concurs with scholarly observations about a significant increase in demand for male cosmetic surgery services (Tsiotsou & Klaus, 2021). Notwithstanding such proliferation, cosmetic procedures targeting male clients remain an underexamined issue (Holliday *et al.*, 2015).

Besides, investigating this particular segment makes a contribution to the literature by verifying the applicability of Taylor's (1999) six-segment message strategy model under novel conditions. Previously, it has been employed to identify communication strategies on American cosmetic surgeons' websites (Ahn, Wu & Taylor, 2013). The present study recontextualizes the framework by implementing it within the context of Thai hospitals' websites whose content focuses on cosmetic surgery catered to male clients.

1. Marketing communication of cosmetic surgery

Marketing communication has three primary purposes: to inform consumers of the product, to encourage purchase decisions and to remind customers that the product still exists (Kotler & Keller, 2007). To achieve these objectives, cosmetic surgery has been marketed under a variety of themes. These include (1) medicalization of the human body (2) empowerment of the human body and (3) association with other cultural activities.

The first theme concentrates on depicting the pre-operative body as an imperfection which can be remedied by medical intervention like cosmetic surgery. In other words, the pre-operative body is depicted as failure to conform to particular aesthetic ideals. It is also associated with a concept of morality. In a Western context, the horns effect refers to social stigma attached to individuals with unprepossessing appearance (Synnott, 1993). Correspondingly, in an Eastern context, discourses regarding female

beauty in Thai society revolve around the Buddhist concept of karma, signifying that beauty is the outcome of one's positive karma (Singhakowinta, 2014). Therefore, individuals whose appearance falls short of aesthetic ideals are expected to take corrective action by purchasing cosmetic surgery to ensure that they are not socially regarded as unfortunate or pitiable due to the possession of negative karma in the past life.

The second theme chiefly pertains to representing cosmetic surgery as a mechanism capable of elevating clients' inner self. Braun (2005) examined online and offline mass media in Western cultures with respect to female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS). It was portrayed as augmenting women's sexual pleasure, specifically orgasm. Subsequently, FGCS was further investigated within a specific cultural context (Australia). Its selling concepts were found to expand from sexual pleasure to women's comfort, hygiene and self-esteem (Chibnall, McDonald & Kirkman, 2020). Notably, the 'empowerment' claimed to derive from purchasing those cosmetic procedures is treated with scholarly suspicion. For instance, they are criticized for reaffirming heteronormativity (Braun, 2005) and burdening women with the responsibility to seek physical perfection (Chibnall, McDonald & Kirkman, 2020).

The third theme connects cosmetic surgery with other cultural activities. In Argentina, after surgical recuperation, clients are given an opportunity to learn Spanish and private tango lessons as part of a seven-day package tour (Viladrich & Baron-Faust, 2014). In Thailand, a medical tour operator, in partnership with a dozen cosmetic hospitals in Bangkok and Phuket, offers a wide range of services which clients can enjoy during the post-operative period including guided sightseeing, spa treatment and entertainment shows (My Beauty Trip Thailand, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

Advertising is one of the mechanisms for marketing communications. Within the context of healthcare, advertising can positively affect clients' perception of hospital brand image (Cham, Lim & Sigala, 2021). Theoretically, Taylor's six-segment message strategy model is a framework which is specifically formulated to analyze advertising messages. By 'message strategy', it refers to "a guiding approach to a company's or an institution's promotional communication efforts for its products, its

services, or itself” (Taylor, 1999, p. 7). In the present study, such an institution concerns cosmetic hospitals in Thailand which seek to promote the services on their English-language websites.

The theory postulates that advertising messages can be categorized into two typologies: ritual and transmission. The former, consisting of the ego, social and sensory segments, emphasizes the emotional delivery of information, whereas the latter, consisting of the routine, acute needs and ration segments, concentrates on the rational delivery of information.

Regarding cosmetic surgery, Ahn et al. (2013) propose a contextualized version of the theory as follows. The *ego* strategy might suggest the ideal identity made possible by cosmetic procedures. The *social* strategy might present that cosmetic surgery is a tool for clients to gain social approval. The *sensory* strategy could allow clients to visualize their newly modified body. The *routine* strategy may offer special discounts on clients' subsequent procedures to encourage repeat consumption. The *acute needs* strategy appears to be reformulated on a more substantial basis than the others. This is because, as the authors have argued, cosmetic surgery is technically selective, i.e. the need for medical care is not similar to that of heart attacks, strokes and accidental injuries. Hence, this strategy may be implemented to build “brand familiarity, brand recognition and consumer trust” (p. 101), so that clients are cognizant of the brand beforehand. Lastly, the *ration* strategy may provide clients with information regarding procedures, recovery times and costs.

Correspondingly, certain groups of men may find the aforementioned strategies particularly tempting. For instance, men who display a tendency for small penis syndrome (SPS) may be intrigued by the *ego* message strategy regarding how penile enlargement surgery is able to boost their masculine self-confidence. For clarification purposes, SPS is defined as “an anxiety about the genitals being observed, directly or indirectly (when clothed) because of concern that the flaccid penis length and/or girth is less than the normal for an adult male, despite evidence from a clinical examination to counter this concern” (Wylie & Eardley, 2007, p. 1449). Additionally, some men aspire to improve their appearance to be ready to meet a new partner after a divorce while others wish to align their own body with perceived gay cultural values such as the possession of well-defined jawlines (Holliday & Cairnie, 2007). In this case, they

may express an interest in the *social* strategy which claims that undergoing cosmetic surgery assists them in winning social recognition.

3. Methodology

To unravel the communication strategies which Thai cosmetic hospitals pursue to market their services to male clients, this study utilizes corpus-assisted discourse analysis, by incorporating quantitative methods into a qualitative discourse analytic framework so that the validity of the findings can be enhanced (Baker, 2012). The following three steps were taken: corpus collection, keyword analysis and qualitative analysis.

3.1 Corpus collection

The source of data collection was three popular search engines – Google, Yahoo and Bing (Murray *et al.*, 2016). Search words were *cosmetic*, *surgery*, *men* and *Thailand*. Among a multitude of results, the screening criteria were established to filter out irrelevant data: (1) the websites belonged to the cosmetic hospitals located in Thailand, (2) the language of the publication was English (since all of the websites retrieved in this study have both Thai and English versions, it is reasonable to assume that the former seeks to communicate with Thai clients while the latter with non-Thai clients such as expatriates and international medical tourists) and (3) the cosmetic procedures were specifically targeted to male clients. Altogether, the corpus comprises the websites of 20 hospitals, and a total number of 73,168 words as detailed in Table 1.

Each hospital was assigned an abbreviated code to be displayed in the subsequent qualitative analysis. In addition, the data was converted into a machine-readable format. The corpus analytic software AntConc 3.4.4w (Anthony, 2019) was employed. Note that grammatical errors were present in some of the original texts. They were retained because intervention from the authors was considered beyond the scope of this study.

Table 1. Overview of the study's corpus.

Hospital (Abbr)	No. of words	URL	Period of publication
Absolute Hair Clinic (AH)	1,999	www.absolutehairclinic.com	2009
Apex Medical Centre (AP)	3,993	www.apexmedicalcenter.co.th	2019
Bcross Clinic (BC)	3,955	www.bcross.com	2017
Bangkok Hospital (BH)	1,540	www.bangkokhospital.com	2020
Bangkok Hospital Pattaya (BP)	263	www.bangkokpattayahospital.com/en	2016
Bumrungrad (BR)	2,421	www.bumrungrad.com/en	2020
Dermaster (DM)	608	https://dermaster-thailand.com/en	2011-2020
Dr Oliver Clinic (DO)	754	https://dr-olivier-clinic.com/	2020
Eternity Clinic (ET)	8,384	http://eternityclinic.co.th/en/home	2020
He Clinic (HE)	8,272	https://heclinics.com	2016-2019
Kamol Cosmetic Hospital (KM)	4,257	www.kamolhospital.com/en	N/A
Male Enhancement Clinic (ME)	6,959	https://male-enhancement-clinic-bangkok.com/	2018-2019
Masterpiece Hospital (MP)	4,440	www.masterpiecehospital.com/en/home	N/A
Naravee Plastic Surgery (NV)	3,446	www.naraveeplasticsurgery.com/en	N/A
Nirunda International Aesthetic Clinic (ND)	1,661	https://nirundaclinic.com	2019
Preecha Aesthetic Institute (PC)	3,250	http://pai.co.th	2011
Samitivej (SM)	644	www.samitivejhospitals.com	2018
Urban Beauty (UB)	9,681	www.urbanbeautythailand.com	N/A
Yanhee International Hospital (YH)	1,038	www.yanhee.net	2019
Yoskan Clinic (YK)	5,633	www.yoskarn.co.th	N/A

N/A = Data not available.

3.2 Keyword analysis

Unlike traditional discourse analysis, corpus-assisted discourse analysis investigates the text in question based on statistically significant data. In this study, it was derived from the identification of keywords which are “words that have a significant higher frequency of occurrence in one corpus than in another comparison corpus” (Subtirelu & Baker, 2018, p. 113). By ‘comparison’, it warrants a reference corpus. The keywords are beneficial to the analysis in the final step because they suggest what text producers tend to emphasize (Baker, 2004).

The reference corpus was compiled according to the screening criteria as mentioned in Step 1. The only exception was that the websites belonged to cosmetic hospitals located in three Asian countries (South Korea, India and Singapore). This was based on evidence that they had been documented as popular cosmetic surgery destinations as explicated in the Introduction section. The entire reference corpus consisted of 81,075 words.

Two statistical measures were used in the analysis. First, log-likelihood pertained to statistically significant frequency. In AntConc, the threshold of the log-likelihood value (the keyness score) was set at greater than 15.13 ($p < 0.0001$) (Millar & Budgell, 2008). Second, %DIFF indicated size effect which concerned the magnitude of the difference between the reference corpus and the current study’s corpus. Unlike log-likelihood, the threshold of %DIFF has remained indeterminate (Gabrielatos & Marchi, 2011). Consequently, it can only be assumed that the larger size effect suggests greater lexical importance.

3.3 Qualitative analysis

Whereas the previous step was a word-level analysis, this step expanded to a sentence- and paragraph-level analysis to ensure comprehensiveness. In other words, this expansion ensures a more complete review of how cosmetic surgery was marketed. Moreover, the chunks of text which were selected for qualitative analysis had to contain the significant keywords derived from the previous step.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Keyword analysis

The top 50 keywords are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Top 50 significant keywords.

Rank	Frequency	Log-likelihood	%DIFF	Keyword
1	359	535.26	79220.66	Thailand
2	149	221.93	32821.39	Bangkok
3	85	116.96	9290.32	stem
4	70	104.22	15366.42	NAD ^a
5	99	86.83	811.41	penile
6	72	85.87	2551.38	cell
7	56	83.37	12273.14	shot
8	105	72.20	479.99	therapy
9	54	71.69	5865.62	HGH ^b
10	143	70.57	285.31	testosterone
11	141	63.69	254.02	blood
12	248	62.18	134.16	penis
13	107	61.40	354.64	sexual
14	75	57.32	590.46	ED ^c
15	75	57.32	590.46	erection
16	195	55.06	150.49	clinic
17	65	53.59	697.87	beauty
18	56	51.68	931.09	cancer
19	53	51.28	1071.02	medicine
20	33	49.12	7191.31	THB ^d
21	87	48.24	336.87	pectoral

22	32	47.64	6970.36	urban
23	35	44.25	3766.60	hyaluronic
24	54	43.02	645.70	performance
25	46	42.21	916.36	circumcision
26	91	41.72	259.04	implant
27	28	41.68	6086.57	Niran
28	27	40.19	5865.62	Preecha
29	65	38.89	378.72	prostate
30	86	38.57	251.88	erectile
31	31	38.54	3324.70	acid
32	77	38.11	286.66	sex
33	25	37.21	5423.72	Apex
34	70	36.40	307.01	enhancement
35	198	33.58	95.30	hair
36	46	33.49	535.22	price
37	82	33.37	223.53	dysfunction
38	21	31.26	4539.92	Naravee
39	29	30.92	1501.87	grafts
40	29	30.92	1501.87	lengthening
41	62	30.19	280.52	disease
42	25	30.03	2661.86	human
43	25	30.03	2661.86	sport
44	28	29.56	1446.64	package
45	64	28.84	253.51	hormone
46	19	28.28	4098.02	ml
47	71	27.81	213.74	levels
48	18	26.79	3877.08	prosthesis
49	25	25.53	1280.93	brain

50 17 25.30 3656.13 PAI^e

a: nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide b: human growth hormone

c: erectile dysfunction d: Thai Baht e: Preecha Aesthetic Institute

Since the corpus concerns male cosmetic surgery, it is understandable that many keywords relate to the male genitals. Notably, some words clearly articulate their problem as displayed in ED (no. 14) which stands for erectile dysfunction (no. 30 and 37 respectively). Concomitantly, prosthesis (no.48) is a word concerning a cosmetic procedure which may be proposed as a solution to the problem. Moreover, a cosmetic procedure relating to the genital size is noticeable as evidenced in penile lengthening (no. 5 and 40 respectively). Taken together, the impression which is conveyed is that a large penis which can be erect whenever a man desires would be applauded. This squares with the findings that advertising discourses and popular culture associate penile size and performance with idealized masculinity (Ostberg, 2010). Moreover, the keyword sport (no.43) arouses curiosity as to how leisure activities are associated with cosmetic surgery. Since this step is a word-level analysis, it is anticipated that the subsequent qualitative analysis will further illustrate this point.

4.2 Qualitative analysis

The analysis is divided into sections in line with each message strategy.

4.2.1 Ego

This strategy is implemented through the problematization of men's physique. In Extract (1), Niran's identity as a bald man is linked with the notion of premature ageing which is, in turn, regarded as undesirable. In a similar vein, the identity of men who were born with a fleshy chest is jeopardized in (2).

(1) Niran has an M-shaped hairline or as it is known medically male hair pattern baldness. It makes the 25-year-old Niran look at least 15 years older than he really is. (MP)

(2) Some men also have congenital asymmetrical breast and they are also perfect candidates for pectoral implant. (YK)

The problematization here corresponds to the first theme reviewed in the 'Marketing communication of cosmetic surgery' section. Nevertheless, a notable feature, which is different from that of Singhakowinta (2014), is that the concept of karma is not articulated. This is indicative of the fact that cosmetic hospitals intend to communicate with non-Thai male clients whose religious background is far more diverse than Buddhism, not to mention those who are irreligious. Hence, it is entirely understandable why the strategy is pursued on a secular basis. Another probable explanation is that karma pertains to a belief that one's appearance is the outcome of past-life intervention which is, in turn, beyond control in the current life. Hospitals may wish to undermine such a belief and portray cosmetic surgery as a tool enabling clients to regain control over their body.

In terms of marketing products or services to male consumers, the problematization is not an entirely novel concept. In fact, it is a recurring theme found earlier in sexual performance enhancing products such as Viagra. The male genitals incapable of displaying sexual power are represented as fundamentally flawed (Brubaker & Johnson, 2008). Unlike those products which target a specific body part, cosmetic surgery can modify the male body practically from head to toe. Consequently, the current study argues that the problematization of the male body within the context of cosmetic surgery is more comprehensive.

Claiming that men's physical identity needs surgical intervention could be appealing to some particular segments who regard cosmetic surgery as a means to correct their perceived physical imperfections. Nonetheless, cosmetic hospitals need to be reminded that there exist other men who elect to remedy their perceived physical imperfections through other means. For example, the issues of being overweight and possessing 'man boobs' is addressed by engaging in bodybuilding and using anabolic-androgenic steroids (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019). Hence, to increase their customer base, hospitals may need to take those 'competitors', be it fitness centers or steroid dealers, into account when formulating their strategy. In other words, they are supposed to communicate with those men regarding how cosmetic procedures can augment their masculine identity more effectively than doing bodybuilding or using steroids.

4.2.2 Social

The social circle which is particularly targeted is a sexual partner. Extract (3) refers to a female sexual partner. To fully satisfy her, men are supposed to have a very large penis. This type of communication adds credence to the previous literature which observes that an increasing number of men are anxious about their penile size, despite having been medically examined and found to be in a normal range, to the point that they feel the urge to seek clinical intervention (Alter, Salgado & Chim, 2011; Hehemann *et al.*, 2019). Unlike (3), the other extract does not specify the sex of the partner. This suggests that the hospital takes into consideration clients' diverse sexuality. In other words, it is perfectly possible that the surgically modified penis be used to give sexual gratification to women, men or both.

(3) No matter what pro-performance people say, nothing satisfies women better than a humungous full-bodied male sex organ. (UB)

(4) With increased blood circulation, a more sensitive penis, and shorter times between erections, you'll be back to pleasuring your partner in no time. (ME)

Taken together, cosmetic surgery is portrayed as being able to assist clients in providing their partners with more intense sexual pleasure. This concurs with men's perception that an ability to sustain an erection and make women achieve orgasm is symbolic of masculinity (Chadwick & van Anders, 2017). Notably, while the findings here exclusively focus on the penis, other body parts are also connected with sexual attractiveness. For instance, men with facial hair from the lower jaw connecting to the mustache and some hair around the pectoral area are regarded as sexually attractive by women (Dixson & Rantala, 2016). For men who have sex with men, height and muscularity are also desirable attributes which some of them expect from their partner (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). As a result, apart from the empowered penis, hospitals may need to consider devising the strategy which features other physical attributes and their benefits to the social circles beyond the scope of heterosexuality.

While the current study has revealed a tendency towards marketing cosmetic procedures to men of diverse sexuality, hospitals need to be reminded that such diversity is much wider than animate beings. Men who are sexually attracted to inanimate objects such as sex robots are known to exist (Döring & Pöschl, 2018). To make matters even more complicated, a distinction between what is animate and

inanimate becomes somewhat blurred as there are sex dolls powered by artificial intelligence. This enables them to be equipped with 'learning ability, responsive movement and smart body sensors' (Smart Doll World, 2021). As artificial intelligence is observed to influence advertising and consumer behavior (Taylor & Carlson, 2021), a question which hospitals should consider is to what extent these 'unconventional social circles' make clients have different needs and expectations which, in turn, affect the way hospitals are supposed to communicate with them.

4.2.3 Sensory

This strategy is pursued to appeal to several senses. To begin with, Extract (5) specifically targets the sense of sight. Apart from that, one may question why clients should undergo the 'French-styled cosmetic surgery' in Thailand, not directly in France. One likely explanation is that clients in industrialized countries are dissatisfied with health providers and insurers at home (Enderwick & Nagar, 2011). The sources of dissatisfaction include waiting times and escalating medical costs (Pocock & Phua, 2011). Hence, Thailand is one of the ideal destinations which offers 'five-star medical facilities' at attractive prices (Sunanta, 2020).

Unlike (5), Extract (6) is crafted to appeal to multiple senses. First, the material used in the surgery is 'soft', signifying the sense of touch. Once it is embedded into a chest, clients will notice that their newly modified chest looks more defined. Therefore, the material itself concerns the sense of touch, but once it is inserted into a client's body, the focus is shifted to the sense of sight.

While (6) is a combination of the physical senses which are relatively external, Extract (7) touches upon both the sense of sight and the inner feeling which is ameliorated by cosmetic surgery.

(5) A revolutionary method developed in Paris, France that can increase your penis girth by 2.5 cm or more and can increase length 2 cm or more when flaccid is now available at our clinic in Bangkok. (ME)

(6) Pectoral implants [...] are relatively soft, flexible and durable. It is placed directly beneath your pectoral muscle. This allows for more definition in muscles over the implant and a natural, even and symmetrical chest area. (NV)

(7) You'll start to see and feel the effects of our anti-aging therapy as your mood improves, you have fewer headaches, and your body feels better. The signs of aging will slowly decrease as the adult stem cells in your body are rejuvenated from an infusion of quality stem cells. (HE)

Among the five senses, the omnipresence of sight is noticeable. This is in line with the quantitative findings that 74% of cosmetic surgery advertisements in American magazines feature nude or partially nude female models (Hennink-Kaminski & Reichert, 2011). In their study, it is hypothesized that the representation of scantily clad models is indicative of the nature of cosmetic surgery which involves the conspicuous transformation of one's appearance. Besides, it tends to be "a direct and effective way to communicate a desirable physical outcome" (Hennink-Kaminski & Reichert, 2011, p. 52). The current study extends such findings in that the sense of sight can also be used to attract male clients and it can be communicated on a verbal basis. Furthermore, the verbal communication enables cosmetic hospitals to craft the messages which capture tangible (e.g. a larger penis) and intangible results (e.g. a more cheerful mood) alike.

Marketing the benefit of cosmetic surgery with respect to a better mental health might be a novel feature which diverts clients away from the corporeal obsession. Nevertheless, given the concept of Unique Selling Proposition (USP) which stresses the importance of product differentiation to the point that it is hardly duplicable and striking enough to attract customers (Reeves, 1961), it is questionable whether such a marketing initiative would enable hospitals to achieve their USP as other health-related businesses also market their services in a similar fashion. One of them includes online fitness coaching which associates a stronger body with a stronger mind through fitness training (Prins & Wellman, 2021). If exercising can also improve mental health, it is highly likely that hospitals need to elucidate why clients should select a seemingly more costly and risky option like cosmetic surgery.

4.2.4 Acute needs

This strategy is pursued to build brand familiarity and consumer trust. Extract (8) suggests that although clients are far away from their home countries, they will not feel out of place or be fraught with communication problems because of the staff's attentiveness and ability to converse in English. This corresponds with the findings

that empathetic communication between medical personnel and patients is a predictor of their satisfaction and loyalty (Fatima, Malik & Shabbir, 2018). To strengthen this aspect, the hospital can make it more explicit that such attentiveness occurs within the context of Thai-styled hospitality which is characterized by “charming natural warmth, gentle touch, graceful hospitality, Thai smile and cheerful friendliness” (Kogiso, 2015, p. 158). Concrete examples of how international clients experience deeper relief after communicating with medical staff can also be provided.

Meanwhile, Extract (9) is indicative of an attempt to earn trust by accentuating the hospital’s technical and research capability. This squares with the scholarly observation that competence is one of the elements in developing confidence (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

(8) Thailand may seem to be a distant place to have surgery if you’ve never travelled here before, but all our staff are fluent in English and offer the perfect balance of professionalism and care. (NV)

(9) PAI has a plan to train foreigner surgeons and give lectures worldwide about our techniques and research as well as spread to the world that Thailand has leading number one in Aesthetic Plastic surgery and Reconstructive Surgery. (PC)

While the previous two extracts concentrate on the concept of trust, Extract (10) touches upon the notion of commitment. In relationship marketing, it is defined as “an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). In this context, it can be construed that the relationship holds between the hospital and clients. The hospital affirms the commitment to maintain its quality by making reference to international accreditation. For clarification purposes, Joint Commission International is an agency which seeks to improve patient safety and quality of health care in the international community (JCI, 2021).

(10) Apex Medical Center has been awarded the JCI accreditation, which validates our commitment to deliver the highest quality of patient care and patient safety solutions. (AP)

Unlike (8) - (10) which concern the international dimensions, Extract (11) focuses on a specialism in serving male clients. It is seemingly linked with trust building by the following argument. Since the hospital specializes in treating male-related sexual issues, it has accumulated an extensive body of knowledge. As a result, clients can rest assured that their health conditions will be treated by experienced specialists.

(11) As a men's health clinic, you and your member are in safe hands as we know how best to protect you and your sexual health. Our specialists have successfully helped men like you with male enhancement and to overcome erectile dysfunction. (ME)

Notably, a similarity between (10) and (11) is that they touch upon the notion of safety. This is understandable as cosmetic surgery involves varying degrees of risk ranging from scarring to even death (Goodman, 2017). Hence, hospitals need to win trust from clients to ensure that they will not be aggravated by anxiety to the point that affects their purchase decision.

4.2.5 Ration

This strategy is utilized to delineate two main points: the benefits of cosmetic procedures (12) - (14) and the minimization of risk (15) - (16).

Extract (12) focuses on the notion of cost-effectiveness. While Connell (2006b) observes that medical tourism tends to achieve a rapid growth and cost differentials remain in place, Wongkit and McKercher (2016) argue that cost does not seem to be a main driver of medical tourists who are visiting Thailand, as it scores much lower than the quality factor. Accordingly, they suggest that for a "mature medical tourism destination like Thailand" (p. 24), hospitals should market their services with a focus on quality rather than cost. This study has revealed that hospitals adopt such a suggestion to a certain extent, as the quality issue is clearly communicated in the previous strategy. In the current strategy, however, the cost factor is still not entirely ignored. This is attributable to the realization that, as mentioned in the sensory strategy section, there remains a segment of clients who value lower medical costs in Thailand.

(12) Urban Beauty Thailand offer Lowest Price FUE Hair Transplant Thailand as 60 baht per graft or as \$1+ USD per graft only, Save up to 70% less than your countries with Hair Transplant Bangkok, Thailand. (UB)

Apart from cost-effectiveness, Extract (13) focuses on the convenience of the procedure as it is bundled with other services. It is in agreement with what has been reviewed in the 'Marketing communication of cosmetic surgery' section. Nonetheless, a difference lies in the fact that the package in Extract (13) is not inclusive of sightseeing tours as opposed to that of a medical tour operator. This suggests that the hospital may still wish to define its role as a medical establishment rather than a travel agent.

(13) For most of Yanhee's cosmetic procedures, package prices usually inclusive of doctor's fees, medicines, room accommodation, nursing services, food, operating room and other fees are offered. (YH)

In addition to convenience, Extract (14) explicates the benefit of the procedure by revolving around the notion of health improvement. Notably, this explication is predicated upon an endorsement from an international organization and on academic work.

(14) In 2007 the World Health Organization endorsed circumcision as a way to help stop the spread of HIV. Studies have also shown that circumcision reduces the spread of other diseases that are passed through sex. (ET)

Proceeding to the minimization of risk, Extracts (15) - (16) are reflective of an attempt to portray post-operative complications as voluntary risks which are handled 'with knowledge of the possible consequences and thus have an aspect of control' (Smillie & Blissett, 2010, p. 119). In Extract (15), control refers to the prescription of a medication which is presumably under medical supervision. Meanwhile, Extract (16) touches upon the aspect of control by making reference to technical advancements.

(15) There is minimal pain in the penis and most patients complain of discomfort rather than pain, which is easily controlled with pain pills. (BC)

(16) The removed grafts are then placed back at the site of thinning hair. Modern techniques remove grafts and leave no visible mark. (HE)

Notwithstanding such an attempt, it should be reminded that clients are also exposed to other sources of information apart from those of cosmetic hospitals. For instance, the adverse consequences of undergoing cosmetic surgery in Thailand have been occasionally featured in domestic and international news alike (Head, 2015; Post

reporters, 2021). Given that the media can exert influence on male clients' perception regarding cosmetic surgery (Janáčková, Weiss & Krejča, 2009), it remains to be seen whether the aforementioned strategy proves to be successful.

Revisiting the USP concept, a question arises whether focusing on the aforementioned selling points (e.g. cost-effectiveness and convenience) can materially assist Thai cosmetic hospitals in attaining their USP. This is because some of Thailand's competitors such as India also market their medical services by focusing on low cost and prompt attention (Connell, 2006a). Hence, formulating the strategy which enables Thai hospitals to maintain competitiveness appears to be quite challenging.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to examine the communication strategies pursued by Thai hospitals on their English-version websites in order to market their services to male clients. The findings reveal that the ego, social, sensory, acute needs and ration strategies are implemented.

It is anticipated that marketing practitioners would gain useful insights from the findings. For instance, although the social strategy appears to acknowledge clients' diversity in terms of sexuality, the focus tends to be on the male genitals, while the social circle beyond the heterosexual world is articulated merely on an implicit basis. Given that explicit messages can heighten a sense of in-group favoritism among non-heterosexual consumers (Um *et al.*, 2015), marketers are suggested to make such acknowledgement on a more incisive basis.

Moreover, although the male genitals may be perceived as the epitome of masculinity which deserves marketing efforts, research shows that men do value other body parts including the abdomen (Drummond and Drummond, 2014) and the gluteus area (De Fazio and Santoli, 2014). Apart from that, marketers should ascertain the needs of non-heterosexual clients along with the body parts and the social circle they value. Such information should provide an advantageous input on enhancing the efficacy of the strategy.

Meanwhile, the acute needs and ration strategies are employed to communicate how post-operative complications are minimized. The acute needs strategy pertains to the

macro-level focusing on the hospitals' competences and international accreditation. Moreover, the ration strategy concerns the micro-level regarding procedural aspects. It asserts that procedural risks can be reduced by means of medication and technical advancement. Taken together, both strategies intend to provide clients with a firm assurance about the safety of cosmetic surgery.

The current study makes a solid contribution to the literature by demonstrating that the six-segment message strategy model is a useful analytical tool not only for quantitative content analysis (as exemplified in Ahn, Wu & Taylor, 2013), but also for qualitative discourse analysis. Furthermore, Taylor (1999) observes that the framework "is based primarily on American research and American audiences, but it probably has some testable cross-cultural value" (p. 16). The present study unravels such value by testing it within the Thai context.

Additionally, this study contributes to the services marketing literature in the following way. Furrer and Sollberger (2007) identify 27 emerging themes from research articles published in leading marketing journals between 1993 and 2003. The authors establish a connection between those themes by classifying them into six clusters: (1) service quality and customer satisfaction (2) strategic aspects of services marketing (3) relationship marketing and customer retention (4) technology and value (5) communication and advertising and (6) service offering.

Given the scope of the current study, it has been illustrated that those separate clusters can possibly overlap. The strategies (cluster 2) are formulated by cosmetic hospitals in the form of advertising messages (cluster 5). On a closer inspection, each of them pertains to various marketing concepts. For example, through the acute needs strategy, clients are cognizant of international accreditation which is associated with service quality (cluster 1). Besides, one of the selling points raised in the ration strategy is the value for money stemming from clients' decision to undergo cosmetic surgery in Thailand rather than their native country (cluster 4).

6. Limitations and recommendations for future research

The absence of the routine strategy is somewhat surprising. This is because during the keyword analysis, the word 'package' (Table 2, no.44) seemed to convey the

impression of repeat consumption as it might refer to a course of procedures which clients would be encouraged to purchase. However, the subsequent qualitative analysis indicated that 'package' in fact referred to a bundle of cosmetic procedures with other additional services such as meal and doctor's fee.

Presumably, hospitals may rely on other channels including on-the-spot communication. Such a face-to-face channel might be more convincing than online written content because of several reasons. First, clients have an opportunity to interact with medical personnel. They may, therefore, obtain a favorable impression about the services. Second, on-the-spot interaction means that clients' physical conditions can actually be examined. Once medical personnel present check-up results to clients and explain that their conditions require more than a single treatment in order to tackle the problem with utmost efficacy, clients may find such empirical evidence more convincing and, in turn, be more willing to purchase a course of procedures. Nonetheless, future studies are encouraged to affirm this hypothesis.

Since the corpus software is able to process only verbal data, other elements on the websites, including pictorial, aural and animated content, are automatically excluded. A multimodally comprehensive approach might reveal more salient facets of the hospitals' servicescape. Technically, the servicescape refers to the physical environment, such as ambience, spatial layout, signs, symbols and artifacts, which have been found to impact on clients' self-congruity, functional congruity and attitudes towards hospitals (Sahoo & Mitra, 2016).

Hence, future studies may apply the theory to analyze non-verbal data in an attempt to identify the servicescape of hospitals, and shed further light on how communication strategies are formulated. Given its nature, it is highly likely that the sensory strategy, which emphasizes visual appeal, would be operative. Moreover, investigating how the organization of the servicescape contributes to repeat consumption (the routine strategy) and consumer trust (the acute needs strategy) is advisable.

Concerning the overlap between the six aforementioned clusters in the services marketing literature, future research can accumulate additional evidence that might be conducive to reclassifying those clusters to reflect more up-to-date developments in the field.

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