

Multilingual Online Communications in Corporate Websites: Cases of Romanian Dental Practices and Their Application to Health Tourism

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Abstract Health is for the modern citizen an ongoing and almost obsessive concern. The process of globalization, which dissolved physical boundaries and allowed the mobility of people, favored the development of health tourism which has seen a real boom and became a social and economic phenomenon that is extremely interesting. In this context, dental care tourism begins to solidify in countries like Romania, because of its competitive price and the quality of services. Therefore, the communication in this environment has to adapt by its new forms, with the demands of potential foreign patients and become an international communication. The limited research in the dental field associated with the provision of online communication in order to reach potential customers offers ground to this exploratory research. This study employs content analysis to explore rated websites of dental practices of the cross-border region of Romania. Findings reveal features that ensure the informative function but which are able to increase the visibility of the dental practices across national borders through multilingual online communication.

Keywords Health tourism • Dental websites • Multilingual online communication • Romania

JEL Classification M3 • M37

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1 Introduction

Health is today for the modern citizen, more than ever, an ongoing concern. The process of globalization, which dissolved physical boundaries and allowed the mobility of people, favored the development of health tourism which has seen a real boom (Esnard, 2005; Turner, 2008; Loh, 2015) and became an extremely interesting social and economic phenomenon while empirical research is rather scarce.

Proulx (2005, p. 13) affirms that “the postmodern individual seeks a better quality of life, he takes care of his health, the health of the body and mind. Vacation and tourist departure are part of the needs that must be met to see his health and well-being”. According to Esnard (2005, p. 2) “offshoring care, because that’s what it is, is supposed to revolutionize the habits of Westerners in leisure and surgery”.

If we speak about a great deficit of practitioners—doctors and assistants—in the Romanian general health system care and in the specific field of the dental care, the specialists observe the abundance of the graduates and the overcrowding of the cities. In a Romanian national journal, M. Panțel, the former President of the Association of Private Practice Dentists in Romania declared that “Dentists could no longer penetrate the local market. How shall I put it, it is not that there are few positions available, there are no positions at all”. According to him, the rural areas are not an option: “Although there are needs, patients do not have money to go to the dentist, and the state no longer provides funds to cover treatments” (Chiruta, 2013). The motivation of dentists who choose to continue their work abroad is complex, related to their future intentions, job satisfaction, financial reason or the possibility to work with the latest technology. For D. Perețianu, former President of the Federal Chamber of Physicians in Romania, the migration is not due necessarily to wages, but to lack of corruption, of arbitrariness and to the existence of clear, transparent forecasts for a career. He notes that the number of graduates is too big: “10 years ago there were 5000 dentists are now they are over 15,000. Too many” (Chiruta, 2013).

In Oradea, Romania, there are several hundred dentists and dental practices. The Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy of the University of Oradea forms every year more and more new generations of dentists. The market is open and there is no limitation in the industry, as it happens for example in the case of notaries. In this context, we can talk about a fierce competitive environment, which is accompanied by a decrease in the possibilities of patients. This social and economic status forces doctors to find other ways to find and keep patients. This results in doctors and dentists seeking alternative ways to perform their profession seeking international patients. Health practitioners do not only work in their countries but due to the economic crisis they aim to attract people from foreign countries who come as health visitors in the respective country (Hanefeld, Lunt, Smith, & Horsfall, 2015). In order to do so, they need to put emphasis on their promotional and communication activities, which have to be appropriate to an international market. The aim of the paper is to explore multilingual online communication in Romanian dental websites and their application to health tourism.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Medical Tourism and Its Target Audience*

Since 2008 when the economic crisis became more evident, prices have become more affordable for patients to travel to eastern countries for medical services than to other western countries as is the case of Hungary for example (Kovacs & Szocska, 2013) or Romania (Constantinescu-Dobra, 2014). These countries may have a leading position in dental tourism, for the benefit of patients, health professionals (private practices or private clinics), the tourism stakeholders (owners of guesthouses and hotels, restaurants or travel agencies).

It was observed by Le Borgne that the countries of Eastern Europe have become ‘Europe’s best in dental care’:

“Very quickly, benefiting from skilled and numerous professionals, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic were able to take advantage of the different rates between East and West and propose, to a lot of persons, dental procedures accessible to all budgets: [...] from aesthetic laundering to implant placement (two techniques that are not reimbursed by health insurance in France) including crowns and care, for prices well below the Spanish ones” (Le Borgne, 2007, p. 48). Research has shown that there are different groups of medical tourists, with different motivations and people in charge of promoting medical tourism should take this into consideration (Wongkit & McKercher, 2013).

Firstly, Europeans for whom treatment services and cosmetic dentistry are too expensive in their countries, have more possibilities to organize their trip in another country: they can appeal to specialized travel agencies in dental tourism, who offer integrated packages with accommodation, transport, meals and insurance. Hanefeld et al. (2015) argue that facilitators may contribute so as potential medical tourists’ needs are catered so that their trip to a destination in regard to received medical treatment is well organized. Tourists may request references from people they know who have been treated satisfactorily in another country in regard to health tourism. Literature has illustrated that opportunities in medical tourism are diffused by word of mouth but also the internet has a role to play in the promotion of medical tourism (Connell, 2013; Yeoh, Othman, & Ahmad, 2013). Dental setups may employ the word of mouth that is associated with information messages, comments and online presentation of personal experiences as a marketing communication tool (Srivastava & Mahajan, 2011) while patients use the internet as the main source of information in addition to personal experience, advertisement and publicity provided from medical organizations and doctors (Yeoh et al., 2013).

In addition, tourists on holiday, in business or in transit may search the medical services in another country. Furthermore, diaspora’s people—those living abroad—may return to their country as medical tourists, as literature has shown (Connell, 2013; Hanefeld et al. 2015; Sarantopoulos, Katsoni, & Geitona, 2014). Thus, those concerned with dental health issues, may search information online for the related services provided.

A lot of tourists can choose and organize their voyage simply on their own and they base their search on Internet resources. The development of media strategies which is among the most important sources of information, provides in detail information that a potential medical tourist may need (Sarantopoulos et al., 2014).

According to the National Institute of Statistics of Romania (2015), 8.5 million foreign tourists entered Romania in 2014, an increased number as compared to 2013; the top ten countries in Europe are Germany, Italy, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Spain, Poland, Austria, Netherlands and Bulgaria. To the authors' best knowledge, there is no study to affirm with certitude the number of "dental tourists in Romania" but considering those travelling for medical dental treatment in many other places, we may argue based on the scarce literature, that tourists could become patients (Kiss, 2015).

Under specific circumstances, they may become patients in dental practices in Romania. The geographic location in a border area is likely to attract foreign tourists in a practice. This is where the city of Oradea is located, on the border with Hungary, with the border crossing point Bors. Oradea is the municipality of Bihor County, the second largest in terms of GDP, in the North West of Romania and the 10th among counties in terms of contribution to national GDP (Consiliul Județean Bihor, 2014). The town is located 10 km from Baile Felix Thermal Spa that is the only balneo-climateric resort in the north-west of Romania (Planul de dezvoltare regională Transilvania Nord 2014–2020, 2015, p. 130), and in a region with a great potential due to an innovating rural tourism (Bugnar & Meșter, 2008, p. 329). Despite the unquestionable tourism potential of the domain, the Strategy for the development of Bihor County never mentions dental tourism.

2.2 *Websites as Innovative Communication Tools in Medical Tourism*

The Internet website is a communication tools which contributes to the promotion and advertisement of a company's or an organization's services and products and it is in fact its mirror. The experts highlight the internet ability to ensure business sustainability and maximize the potential development of a business, so for a dental practice "online presence is the key to the process of communication with customers [...] Where else does a company have the opportunity to earn millions of consumers with a significantly cheaper cost than that of the traditional forms of advertising, if not on the internet?" (Grosseck, 2006, p. 210).

It was revealed by V. Cepoi, state adviser to the Prime Minister of Romania, who declared in July 2013 in the International Medical Travel Journal, that

Thousands of people are treated in dental clinics here, which they promote by themselves. The foreign patients pay a quarter of what they would pay for these services in their countries. Thus, there is an opportunity for wider Romanian medical tourism. In spa and health tourism there is still a significant potential for growth. [...] We have resources, we are motivated and we want to develop this activity to the benefit of the patients from Romania, from Europe and from anywhere in the world (<http://www.imtj.com/news/?entryid82=424423>).

Tourists come mainly in offices and private clinics, not in state hospitals. Therefore, professionals must develop their own communication strategies. Internet is of special interest to the tourism industry since websites may be the first and only contact with the potential customers from another country. Traditionally, and in the local context, medical offices can take advantage of their presentation and their communication activities in brochures and catalogs, such as the Yellow Pages type. Nonetheless, dentists have begun to realize that new innovative techniques of communication such as online communication over the Internet has become today the only viable way to increase their clients and retain them (Cormany & Baloglu, 2011; Romano & Baum, 2015). In the specific study, the internet can highlight the advantages of the services in the Romanian practices.

WorlDental.org which is defined as “a popular dental health web magazine created for people who take care of their smile, oral and overall health”, in the article “Cheap Dental Tourism Growing Fast in Romania”, remarks that

Romania will become one of the most affordable spots for dental tourism because patients will encounter affordable prices for top dental services; they have relatively short dental treatment periods; dental offices are equipped with top medical technology devices; the dental professionals are very well trained; huge innovations in the field of cosmetic dentistry are also on the line. This is particularly important, since cosmetic dentistry is the most expensive dental practice in highly developed countries, and it is a service which is usually never covered by a standard insurance policy (<http://www.WorlDental.org>).

The real challenge is presented today because of foreign tourists. Based on a survey, coordinated by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication in the 27 Member States of the European Union and in Croatia between 24th May and 9th June 2013, the use of online social networks was highlighted with Germany to use social networks at a percentage of 50 %, Italy at a percentage of 50 %, France at a percentage of 54 %, United Kingdom at a percentage of 57 %, Hungary, at a percentage of 61 %, Spain at a percentage of 58 %, Poland at a percentage of 52 %, Austria at a percentage of 58 %, the Netherlands at a percentage of 61 %, Bulgaria at a percentage of 64 % (Eurobarometer, 2013). Thus, there is a huge potential based on the number of incoming tourists but also due to the fact they use online social networks for Romanian dentists to employ Internet in their communication campaigns to raise the number of medical tourists.

The offer exists or it can be created; the high quality of services is associated to very interesting prices. What should be highlighted is the channel of transmitting information. Previous research on marketing of dental services has identified brand awareness, service information, targeting of people, feedback tools as essential items that one interested in employing internet as a tool should take into consideration (Constantinescu-Dobra, 2014). The same author affirmed that the results on the use of internet as a marketing tool in Romanian dental industry in comparison to print advertisements, showed that although dentists tend to have an online presence, this is limited to the use of basic elements (Constantinescu-Dobra, 2012).

Nevertheless, websites today are complex devices that combine research, development, innovation and safety: they provide scientific information and especially teaching. Internet is used as a marketing tool providing a way of connecting 'customers' to 'sellers' of health-related services (Geangu, Orzan, Gardan, & Geangu, 2010; Romano & Baum, 2015). Creating a website is an excellent solution to become visible, together with other means which complete the informative role: multilingual website versions (English, Italian, Hungarian, French or German), use of a logo and of a slogan, blogs, different facilities of the websites (pictures, videos, calendar, search options, application for smartphones), testimonials and online guestbooks.

This research adds to the existing literature in regard to the way multilingual online communication takes place from dentists to reach diverse populations (Turner, Kirchhoff, & Capurro, 2012) focusing in the area of Oradea, Romania. Taking one step further from Kavoura and Constantin's (2015) analysis of dental practices websites in Oradea and the adherence or not of a regulatory framework associated with communication about health services so that Romanian people may be informed about dentists' practices, this research explores the presence of multilingual online communication directed to foreign people. The demand side for health services may come from abroad and communication activities on offer may take into consideration language barriers.

The new framework strategy for multilingualism recognizes the role of the foreign languages in the economy and posits that "increasing citizens' language skills will be equally important in achieving European policy goals, particularly against a background of increasing global competition" (European Commission, 2005, p. 14). Conceived for the international trade, the ELAN study concluded that "a significant percentage of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) across the EU and the wider Europe are losing export business through lack of language skills" (ELAN, 2006, p. 57). One of the final recommendations is to do or implement further research into "the impact of language skills on other areas of the economy, for example: Tourism" (idem, p. 60), we consider that the present study deepens the conclusion of a study that argued that the Romanian tourism is a genuine interest to the international world with clearly defined strategic lines, but unfortunately doesn't have the same openness to foreign languages, that are a vehicle in the international communication (Constantin, 2014a). If for example, hotels, directly interested in a international communication, ignore the potential of a multilingual website, a solution yet simple, quick, inexpensive, durable and very profitable (Constantin, 2014b), should the dental practices pay more attention to the multilingual communication, which is essential for receiving foreign patients?

3 Methodology

In order to answer to this question, we used the content analysis which is “a technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text. The content refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated” (Neuman, 2003, p. 219). In the specific study, the researchers sought words and phrases in foreign languages, as they were specified from the themes associated with the online multilingual communication in Romanian dental websites. This took place in the so called direct way, those words or phrases that are physically present and counted rather than on the latent content which depends on the subjective judgment in order to lead to reliable results (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005; Robson, 2010, pp. 420–421). The study is exploratory and aims to examine the way dental websites present online multilingual communication in order to present their services to the potential foreign tourists. This pragmatical research puts emphasis on:

- the analysis of themes emerged in the literature such as the emphasis put on the communication of information in other languages—apart from Romanian—through the existence of multilingual website versions (English, Italian, Hungarian, French or German),
- submission of a button for ‘events’ fed with pictures and videos of the dentist being involved in social campaigns,
- detailed information about medical tourism that may make the trip of a foreign tourist easier to organize.

The collection and analysis took place between since December 2014 for the city of Oradea, Romania. Based on three sites portals that Romanian dentists use to promote their practices (<http://www.dentistonline.ro>; <http://www.medicistomatologi.ro>; <http://www.cliniciimplantdentar.ro>) and taking into account the Google ranking algorithm for Oradea’s dentists’ online presences, the authors selected to content analyze those sites from the portals that were in the first ten positions for a period of 5 months (<http://www.seomark.co.uk/how-does-google-rank-websites/>). At the time of writing this paper (May 2015) and for an ongoing period of 5 months, the authors observed the online presence of these sites that continue to have the same ranking as they had 5 months ago.

Herring (2004) notes that in computer mediated discourse analysis, sampling is rarely done randomly, since random sampling sacrifices context. In that way, textual analysis can take into consideration ongoing participant observation of online communication.

4 Results

In the case of the ten sites analyzed, we remarked the presence of the following elements related to the multilingual communication and the application to the health tourism.

Multilingual Website Versions

The websites analyzed reveal that only three sites take into consideration the potential of a multilingual communication and present the information in other languages. The languages used are English, Italian, German and Hungarian. All the sites use English, because it's a global language used as lingua franca in economy (Graddol, 2006, p. 30). In regard to the other languages, Italian, Hungarian, French or German are chosen in relation with the nationality of the potential patients.

It is typical to note that two practices have multilingual sites, active and updated. Besides English, they are edited in Italian and Hungarian; only one site has a version in German and in French. It was found that one site exposes flags, symbols of foreign languages without the use though of specific content. There seems to be an indifference for the multilingual communication, as it is proven by the sites of dental practices, although it is a cheap and quick solution that could revitalize the promotion of dental tourism to foreigners. It is noticed that none of the site has a version in rare languages like Chinese or Russian. Furthermore, the multilingual versions of the websites may underlie print promotional material.

Presence of Logos and Slogans

Two sites don't have a logo, while the other eight have a simple logo, representing a stylized letter (two practices) or an artistic tooth (or two teeth, in different colors). The slogans are in Romanian language and only two of them are in English, so created for foreign patients too: "Creating a beautiful smile" and "What a smile". The existence of a name and of a slogan in foreign language or easily understandable by foreigners is the sign for the existence of a strategy of communication oriented to foreign patients.

Testimonials and Guestbooks

One site provides photos and testimonials of the patients; the statements would have greater impact if they were made in foreign languages. The presence of the section Guestbook on another site is a proof that this element has a potential impact on the patient's reception, because the personal experience is more relevant than any advertising. A real dialogue between the doctor and the potential foreign tourist is provided (<http://www.oradea-stomatolog.ro/intrebari-si-raspunsuri>). This does not include information about dental and health care issues but information about travel details. Travel details are very significant for medical tourists (Sarantopoulos et al., 2014; Wongkit & McKercher, 2013) and this exploratory research adds to the existing literature.

Provision of Information for Medical Tourism

In regard to the provision of information that would help potential visitors from other countries to come to Oradea with the view to receiving health services provided here, there are only two sites of the ten analyzed that provide information based on accommodation, prices and other important elements a potential visitor may need to initiate a trip. Two trends are noticed: on the one hand a multilingual presentation of the medical tourism made in foreign languages and on the other hand a detailed presentation made only in Romanian language.

In particular, on the site of the practice *Dental Art* we find the presentation of the practice in relation with the health tourism in English, German, Italian and Hungarian language: “Many patients choose to combine the dental treatment with a holiday, especially coming from countries where dentistry is practiced at much higher prices than in Romania. We have patients from Italy, England, Germany, France, USA as well as the Nordic countries. They benefit from our premium priced services at the same prices where at home they would benefit for only social treatments. At the same time they have the opportunity to relax by visiting the Apuseni Mountains or spend time at the thermal baths in Felix” (<http://www.dental-art.ro>).

All the booking steps are presented on the site, the foreign patients have to use a Contact form and to provide a panoramic x-ray in order to obtain a treatment plan with prices. The plan is approximate and only an estimation of the costs for future treatments can be provided. The practice offers information for the organization of the trip: flights, accommodation, local transport and even tips on what one could visit. Specific names regarding accommodation are provided rather than indicating a general site where one can choose where to stay.

Another trend is to conceive a special section dedicated to the Medical tourism offer, but all information is in Romanian language. The organization of the information provides a series of practical information relative to the transport and accommodation, with reference to the prices charged, and includes a reproduction of a virtual dialogue between the doctor and the potential foreign patient, on subjects like prices, advantages, accommodation, nationality of patients, language skills of the doctors.

5 Conclusion

This research is part of a wider research which aims to illustrate the role websites may have in order to attract foreign patients as potential customers of dental practices and the way multilingual online communication takes place. According to Claeysen (2009, p. 15), in the virtual network, a company can turn its activity “into a powerful virtual business relationships”, producing “a revolution of mentalities and behaviors” and making possible “a velvet revolution patterns, devices and methods of sale and communication”.

A good site would have to accomplish an informative role, but it has to provide the information in a specific way, modern and interactive, appropriate for national and international potential patients. Readability of websites associated with medical issues and in particular dental ones is also important so as patients to be able to read the information provided (Jayaratne, Anderson, & Zwahlen, 2014). In addition, websites should be continuously updated (McLeod, 2012). Healthcare marketing activity on the internet has become a more important strategy in the last decade for dental providers and the use of websites is an efficient marketing tool for bringing closer patients to dentists. Research on the online communication and dental websites may add to the limited existing literature (Turner et al., 2012) and this research explored the case of Oradea, Romania. The new and innovative tools are generally ignored by the websites of dentist's practices in the town of Oradea, including the first ten websites that were better referenced. Despite this, they could attract foreign tourists with a better presentation of quality services and competitive prices and stop or slow down the migration of Romanian dentists to France, England, etc. The few websites analyzed is a limitation of the research. Dental tourism issues emerged and further research needs to be done to reach generalizable results.

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