Promoting Medical Tourism: A Multimodal Communicative Framework in Private Hospitals from an Intercultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The medical tourism industry, seriously affected by the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19), must effectively communicate its online promotional messages to boost the sector. Given that the medical tourism sector is a global one, cultural diversity is also essential. Studies on cultural heterogeneity, however, have only looked at one type of discourse, primarily the linguistic mode. Previous research failed to consider the multimodal approach, which could have hindered anticipated promotional messages from reaching potential foreign medical tourists. This study examines how 12 hospital web pages from Malaysia and Singapore combine several modes to provide marketing messages to foreign medical tourists. From a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) standpoint, linguistic analysis was conducted using Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) model of metafunction theory, while visual analysis was conducted using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework. The multimodal data were further analyzed using Hall's cultural dimension of context-dependency, which classifies cultures into high-context and low-context cultures. The selected Malaysian and Singaporean hospital web pages primarily exhibit characteristics commonly found in low-context cultures, including detailed code systems, clear and explicit messages, highly structured content, information focus, and linear organization. These findings were inconsistent with the existing intercultural communication literature, which typically associates Asian countries with high-context cultures. The study's contribution in the form of a multimodal communicative framework aims to help stakeholders and copywriters in medical tourism understand potential cultural sensitivity and communicative strategies while designing successful medical tourism websites for international promotion. It is crucial for medical tourism

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websites to effectively deliver promotional messages to prospective medical tourists during this COVID-19 recovery phase as it can be one of the ways to establish trust and reliance.

Keywords: cultural context dimension; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; online promotional discourse; medical tourism; Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL)

INTRODUCTION

Medical tourism is one of the services that is continuously growing in the tourism industry. This business, which is ranked third worldwide in terms of income creation (Xu et al., 2023), has drawn interest from many countries as a result of growing awareness of the potential of the global medical tourism market. Sharma et al. (2020) estimated that the global market for medical tourism was valued at USD 44.8 billion in 2019. This expansion was ascribed to several factors, such as hospitals' provision of better healthcare, advanced technology, and economic viability. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp decline in the global medical tourism business in 2020. As a matter of fact, COVID-19 has severely harmed several well-known medical tourism destinations, including those in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, three of Southeast Asia's most popular travel destinations (Gopalan et al., 2021). Together with Singapore and Thailand, Malaysia was listed as one of the top Asian countries for medical tourism prior to the COVID-19 epidemic (The Star, 2023). Every year, 500,000 Indonesians travel to Penang, Malaysia, for medical care, and it was expected that this number would increase (Liza Fathia, 2018). Nevertheless, as a result of COVID-19's detrimental effects on the nation's profitability, Malaysian healthcare travel revenue saw a significant decline in 2019 from RM1.7 billion to RM777 million and RM585 million in 2020 and 2021, respectively (The Star, 2023).

In light of this, many countries have implemented effective measures to counteract the decline in earnings from the medical tourism industry. Malaysia in particular allocated RM35 million in Budget 2021 for the healthcare travel sector through digitalization (MHTC, 2020), which indicates that the country is cognizant of the necessity of optimizing the utilization of digital platforms to connect with foreign medical tourists, propelled by the Malaysian Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) Blueprint 2021-2025. MHTC's five-year planned initiatives under the Malaysian Healthcare Travel Industry Blueprint for industry stakeholders are encapsulated under Three Strategic Pillars: Healthcare Travel Ecosystem, Malaysia Healthcare Brand, and Markets for Malaysia Healthcare. Meanwhile, Singapore increased the revenue of the medical tourism industry by incorporating it into a new budget as part of a post-pandemic recovery package, with a specific focus on revitalizing the Singaporean aviation sector to promote travel (The Straits Times, 2022). Singapore also invested heavily in technology as it strives to become the world's first "Smart Nation". Investment in-digital innovation plays a crucial role in keeping the economy open during the coronavirus pandemic (CNBC, 2023). These prevalent practices in the field of medical tourism are centered on web-based services, product advertising, and promotional messaging.

Nevertheless, the tactics employed by Malaysia and Singapore will not work if robust online marketing is not put in place to entice possible medical tourists. Loda (2011) emphasized the significance of digital marketing and said that attracting medical tourists requires high-quality internet content. Since most medical tourism operations are hospital-focused, one of the online advertising platforms that should be considered is the websites of private hospitals that promote medical tourism. Language analysis is no longer sufficient to research contemporary text patterns, such as websites, so it is imperative to examine multimodal realizations to raise awareness among

copywriters and website designers. Among the most important features of Internet marketing via websites is the incorporation of multimedia, collections of photos, interactive elements, animated graphics, and audio in addition to text (Würtz, 2005). These intricacies serve as more evidence that designing and building interesting and creative websites can be difficult. Consequently, stakeholders in the medical tourism industry should diversify their forms of communication and promotion through online marketing platforms (Kadir & Nayan, 2021). As a result, a multimodal analysis of this kind of advertising material is required to clarify the representational meaning which is an appropriate instrument for the analysis of tourism discourse. The combination of language and visuals has evolved into a crucial marketing strategy for creating an attractive and desirable image of the destination to be visited.

What adds to the challenge of creating a website is the fact that websites are designed and presented within a range of cultural contexts, making the process even more complex (Stoian, 2015). The successful delivery of messages on websites is likely to be hampered by cultural differences in communication methods because information on the websites may be considered sensitive due to cultural differences and exhibit varying characteristics depending on their utilization (Cermak, 2020). Much research has focused on comprehending variations in website design resulting from intercultural communication. These variations emerge as a consequence of the influence of online and global marketing, particularly due to the complex challenges of marketing digital medical tourism across diverse cultures. Past studies have revealed that communication approaches on websites are essential. The literature on culture and websites has covered a wide range of topics, including website design and how other cultures interact with it (Cermak, 2020), and how different cultures communicate on websites (Oswal & Palmer, 2018). Past studies by Usunier and Roulin (2010) examined to what extent and how website content and design mirror the interaction preferences of those who create high-context cultures as opposed to low-context cultures. Although cultural relevance has been considered in the promotional strategy of such websites, there is a scarcity of studies that focus on the marketing of medical tourism.

Prospective international medical tourists can learn more about how multimodal communicative acts of representative and commissive arise from the way language and images are used to promote medical tourism on private hospital websites in Malaysia and Singapore. This study aims to examine how private hospital websites use language and visuals to promote medical tourism. Specifically, the study will examine how these multimodal characteristics are interpreted to promote medical tourism through representative and commissive speech acts.

PRIVATE HOSPITAL WEBSITES PROMOTING MEDICAL TOURISM

As an international market, medical tourism has witnessed robust growth over the past decade and has always been associated with private hospitals, which are considered the key to medical tourism. Many governments view private hospitals' cooperation as very much needed in developing the medical tourism sector. Private hospital websites play a key role in promoting medical tourism by highlighting the location of their medical facilities along with the variety of specialized staff, services, therapies, and equipment they offer. Moghavvemi et al. (2017) argue that these platforms are crucial for attracting patients from both domestic and international markets. Additionally, Woo and Schwartz (2014) found that medical tourists tend to value medical-related factors more than tourism-related ones.

Private hospital websites that promote medical tourism should be improved to satisfy the needs and concerns of medical tourists from a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic

backgrounds. By doing so, the websites will be better equipped so that prospective medical tourists can make better decisions. Mason and Wright (2011) suggest that these websites should be extended to include more credible, trustworthy, and in-depth medical and nonmedical information. Websites of private hospitals that lack relevant information and customer appeal may negatively affect the medical tourists' decision-making when selecting the hospital and the destination country (Lowry et al., 2008). Website interactivity is also an essential factor influencing medical tourists' perceptions of trust, attitudes toward site content, and intention to purchase products and services (Chen et. al., 2005). For these reasons, there is a need to improve private hospital website content and interactivity, as these elements can increase currency values and boost recognition.

Despite private hospitals proactively taking advantage of the growth of the medical tourism industry and investing in online promotion through their hospitals' websites, there has been limited research attention directed toward the discourse of medical tourism on these private hospital websites. The number of studies that have compared online promotional messages and communication strategies on websites of private hospitals from different countries is exceptionally limited. Moreover, none has been conducted in the Southeast Asia (SEA) region thus far. The websites of the medical travel facilitators have been the primary focus of the current research on online information related to medical tourism. These include medical tourism companies (Turner, 2011), thermal tourism facilities websites (Inci & Sancar, 2017), official websites, and social media (Borzyszkowski & Lubowiecki-Vikuk, 2019).

Meanwhile, Moghavvemi et al. (2017) analyzed private hospital websites promoting medical tourism in India, Malaysia, and Thailand to examine how these hospitals present themselves online and seek to appeal to the perceived needs of prospective medical tourists. The study revealed pertinent results that revealed some differences among the Indian, Malaysian, and Thai hospital websites, highlighting the need for hospital managers to improve their hospitals' online presence and interactivity. This is supported by the findings of Wan Fatimah Solihah et al. (2021a), whose research underscores the critical importance of maintaining a clear and coherent website text because such clarity is crucial to capturing the attention of potential international medical tourists and restoring their confidence, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era.

Reviewing previous research, it was discovered that most studies on medical tourism websites have examined medical travel facilitators' websites, commercial portals, and commerce-related sites and focused on reviewing the content and format of the websites. Additionally, studies that examined the medical tourism discourse in the websites and those that compared multimodal realization of representative and commissive communicative acts of private hospital websites from different countries are particularly limited in number. Given the limited number of studies in these areas, it is crucial to address this research gap identified in the literature. Thus, an investigation was carried out to determine if there were any similarities or differences in the use of multimodal communicative strategies in private hospital websites' discourse promoting medical tourism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

MULTIMODAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis from a multimodal viewpoint is based on the idea that language analysis alone is insufficient to deliver modern patterns of textuality since new technologies like the Internet and mobile phones have fundamentally altered discourses (Blommaert, 2011). Given this, multimodality is an effective method for studying medical tourism websites and their discourse. This study's multimodal framework used the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach,

incorporating the semiotic analysis model developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) and the linguistic analysis model developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). The analysis process began with linguistic analysis and moved on to visual analysis using the metafunctions for specific pages inside each website. According to Halliday (1985), the concept of a metafunction is one of a limited number of concepts required to explain how the semantic system of language is organized. Metafunctions are known as systemic clusters that belong to a group of semantic systems and provide meanings of a similar kind.

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is an extremely helpful descriptive and interpretive framework for considering language as a strategic, meaning-making tool (Eggins, 2004). Halliday's (1985, 1994) idea of metafunctions serves as the framework for the linguistic analysis used in this study, and each function is looked at separately. The ideational (logical and experiential) function concerns how reality is developed in discourse; the interpersonal function is concerned with the grammatical choices that help people enact their various and complex interpersonal relations; and the textual function is concerned with the internal structure and communicative nature of a text (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). According to the distribution of clause types—clause simplexes and complexes—the texts were defined by a logical analysis. Climatic and logico-semantic links were examined in the clause complexes. Examining each clause's processes, participants, and circumstances is part of the experiential analysis. Of the three metafunctions, this study was concerned with the ideational metafunction which examines the transitivity elements, as well as the textual metafunction, which investigates a text's theme and information organization.

In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), transitivity is a system that categorizes the types of processes, participants, and circumstances within a clause. Material processes focus on actions or events, not necessarily tangible, involving actors who perform the action and goals that receive or are affected by it. Mental processes relate to internal activities such as feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, involving sensers (those who experience these) and phenomena (what is experienced) (Eggins, 2004). Relational processes concern the relationships between entities, which can be attributive (ascribing qualities) or identifying (defining identity). Within attributive processes, the entity with a quality is the carrier, and the quality itself is the attribute; in identifying processes, the token is what is being defined, and the value is what defines it. Circumstances add context to these processes, describing extent, location, manner, cause, contingency, accompaniment, role, matter, and angle.

The theme in SFL refers to a clause's given or familiar information, while the rheme provides new or unfamiliar information. Thematic structures help convey the communicative intent of a text, influencing how information is presented and understood. Themes can be topical, interpersonal, or textual. Topical themes can be unmarked (where they align with the subject in declarative clauses) or marked (where they deviate from typical subject positions, such as using adjuncts). Interpersonal themes carry interpersonal elements like mood or modality, and textual themes connect the clause to the surrounding text. Thematic progression, as introduced by Daneš (1974), involves patterns of information flow between themes and rhemes, with three common patterns: theme reiteration (constant theme), the zig-zag pattern (linear theme), and the multiple pattern (split rheme). These thematic structures are crucial in structuring discourse to inform and persuade, particularly in promotional contexts like private hospital websites.

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VISUAL ANALYSIS

The visual analysis adheres to the visual design paradigm developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). The representational, interactive, and compositional visual metafunctions are the three that were examined for the six websites. Information value, salience, and framing have been examined concerning the compositional function, while represented participants, processes, and circumstances have been examined in relation to the interactive function, image act, social distance, perspective, angle, and modality markers. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explained that visual design theory follows the same three-layered patterns of meaning as language. This means visuals can be thought of as verbal language, realizing all three metafunctions of language. However, as this study focused only on transitivity and textual metafunctions, the metafunctions for visual analysis performed therefore comprised representational and compositional analysis only. Table 1 explains the analytical tools utilized to analyze verbal (transitivity and textual) and visual (representational and compositional) in this study.

TABLE 1. The analytical tools for language and visual analysis

Metafunction	Analytical Tools	Types
Ideational (Transitivity)	Process	Relational Material Mental Verbal Behavioural Existant
	Participant	Identified/Identifier Actor/Goal Behaver Existent
	Circumstance	Manner Time Place Extent Role
Textual	Theme Types	Marked Topical Theme Unmarked Topical Theme Interpersonal Theme Textual Theme
	Theme Progression Patterns	Reiteration pattern (Constant Theme) Zig-zag pattern (Linear Theme) Multiple patterns (Split Rheme)
Representational	Narrative Structure	
	Conceptual Structure	
Compositional	Salience	
	Framing	

MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATIVE ACT

Understanding the changing function of language in online contexts such as websites is central to understanding contemporary notions of literacy since texts and visuals take on new functions and relationships. Texts list what would be impossible to demonstrate, while visuals show what would

take too much time to read. Texts and visuals seem to contribute differently to the total messages. However, when combined, a multimodal text can deliver a better promotional message to the audience through its multimodal communicative act (Wan Fatimah Solihah et al., 2022).

Communicative acts are crucial in the business and promotion domains for marketing and promoting services and expertise as well as influencing potential clients. Any utterance or series of utterances that involve expressing oneself through a combination of words and sounds, and thereby communicating with others is referred to as a communicative act. Speaking act is another term for communicative act. Because language encompasses several classes that carry out actions, Austin (1962) defined language as a medium of information communication. Searle (2014) discovered that communicative activities can be classified into five kinds using Austin's (1962) criteria as a guide. The first class is representatives where the speaker represents the state of an affair. Secondly are directives where the speaker aims to get the hearer to commit to a future course of action. Commissive, the third class of communicative acts, is when the speaker persuasively commits a future course of action. Fourthly, expressive, is where the speaker wants to express himself/herself on feelings or attitudes, etc. The last communicative act, declarations, refers to an extralinguistic context that changes the situation. Based on these five classes of communicative acts, the promotional communicative acts that are employed as the data of this study are categorized as representatives and commissive.

CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

Medical tourism is a cross-cultural phenomenon and to promote medical tourism across cultures, the cultural diversity among different communities should be dealt with carefully and properly. However, the promotion of medical tourism often overlooks the influence of culture, despite its significant impact on the industry (Liu & Chen, 2013). The cultural contradictions of medical tourism, including the clash between the promise of affordable medical services and the reality of economic disparities, further underscore the need to consider culture in promotional efforts (Perfetto & Dholakia, 2010). The influence of cultural context on international strategy, including promotional strategies, is significant and should be carefully considered (Momos & Tsuma, 2020). Therefore, due to the intercultural nature of international advertising, the copywriter of any tourism promotional materials must keep in mind the cultural context, the needs, and the expectations of the audience to ensure a maximum impact in culturally different situations.

In order to comprehend the variations in communicative acts that could have their roots in a nation's culture, this study further analyses the cultural perspective component. How visuals and verbal are utilized to describe places, circumstances, and people can help to explain the social interactions practiced in the country and at the same time develop an expressive multimodal act that can demonstrate cultural patterns (Stoian, 2015). As for the analysis, the cultural dimension of context was selected (Hall, 2000; Hall & Hall, 1990) as it seemed to be the most relevant to the type of message studied and its function. Therefore, SFL was selected for the analysis of the websites in this study to provide more evidence to support extant studies that considered SFL effective for the analysis of digital media. Moreover, the highlighted characteristics from the analyses would be able to reflect the cultural communicative strategies adopted. As such, this study also attempted to emphasize the fact that cultural competence needs to be given an important focus in today's global business world.

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Hall puts forth two categories of culture, high-context and low-context. When it comes to communicating meaning, situational, and relational knowledge, people in high-context cultures, according to Hall and Hall (1990), rely less on words and less on being explicit. Because meaning in this context is allocated based on shared experiences and anticipations, which lead to conclusions and situational forecasts, some aspects are communicated indirectly or not at all. Low-context societies, on the other hand, rely more on the explicit verbal code and far less on nonverbal cues to construct and interpret meaning. As a result, communication in these settings entails the focalization of information and details, the linear arrangement of text in logical arguments, and the conveyance of direct, explicit, and highly organized messages. Figure 1 explains the process used for both the multimodal discourse analysis (first stage) and the culture analysis (second stage) of analysis.

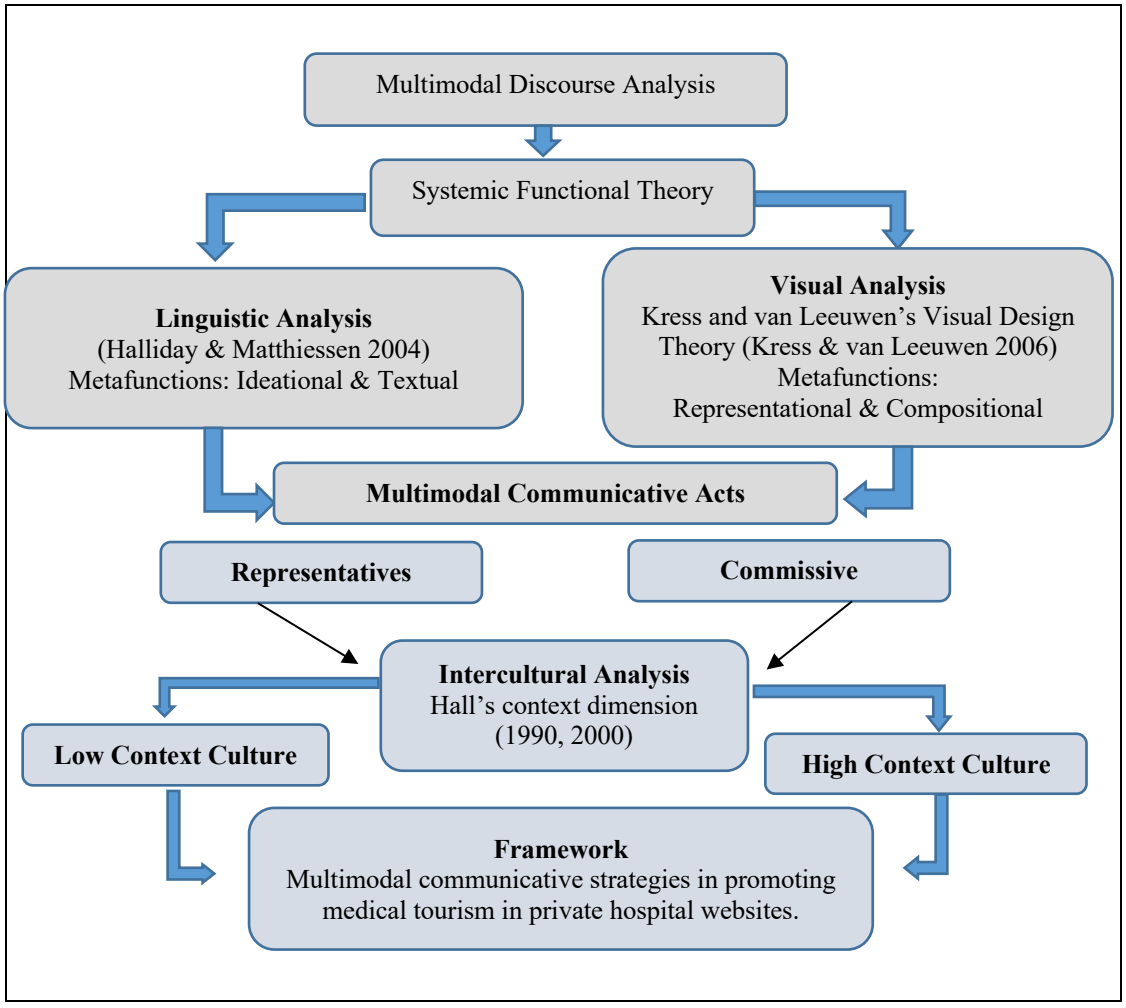


FIGURE 1. The theoretical framework

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

In this study, the data were gathered from the websites of private hospitals in Malaysia and Singapore. Identification of the number of private hospitals in each country was based on the country's Ministry of Health official website, and a total of 210 listed private hospitals (eight in Singapore and 202 in Malaysia) were identified. This study involved two private hospitals from Malaysia and two private hospitals from Singapore. A small number of search parameters were used to choose three websites from each hospital. To begin with, English should be the language utilized on the selected website. Selecting websites that utilize English as their primary language of promotion suits the study's goal, which was to investigate how medical tourism in various nations is marketed to an international audience. Secondly, this study focused on private hospitals from Southeast Asian countries that are the dominant players in the medical tourism market. In Southeast Asia, Malaysia, and Singapore are the two leading countries for medical tourism (Gopalan et al., 2021), so private hospital websites from these countries were thus selected for the study. Thirdly, the websites contain multimodal elements, such as words and images. We selected 12 web pages based on their function, specifically those that best depict the facilities and expertise of the private hospital and are most geared towards promoting medical tourism to potential international patients. In short, for a fair process of comparing and contrasting, it was decided that the selection of the web pages from the two countries must revolve around the same topic. This approach would allow for the process of comparing the linguistic and visual features of these websites. The analysis was conducted from the same angle and perspective as the promotional texts and images used in the web pages would share similar content. Accordingly, three topics were chosen for comparative analysis in this study as these were covered in the web pages of all the selected websites. These topics were About Us, Medical Tourism, and Hospital Facilities.

DATA ANALYSIS

There are two stages of the analysis of this study. Multimodal analysis is the initial step, which examines how the websites' verbal and visual content are combined to create meaning. To interpret the multimodal data within a cultural framework, the second step involves intercultural analysis. For the multimodal analysis, the websites of the chosen private hospitals underwent several manual examinations and processes. The SFL analysis of language metafunctions in this study was conducted at the level of the clause in the text. The text analysis was performed manually involving several steps. Initially, the texts from the webpages were segmented into clauses. Next, language characteristics within each clause were identified using transitivity and textual metafunctions. The visual analysis comprised two processes. Firstly, the most prominent visuals within the web pages were identified. Subsequently, an analysis of representational and compositional metafunctions was conducted to examine how these elements collectively contribute to the cohesive meaning of the entire text. Therefore, to facilitate categorization and interpretation, all 12 web pages from the six private hospital websites analyzed underwent systematic analysis, with results tabulated as percentages. Table 2, for instance, shows a sample analysis illustrating the categorizing process based on the transitivity metafunction. This step involved classifying process types (verb groups) and participant roles (noun groups), quantifying their occurrence as percentages relative to the total number of clauses extracted from the selected web pages.

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TABLE 2. Types of process analysis

Type of process		Instances		Total
Material		established, help, located, promote & develop, position, promoted, gives, conducts		8/22 (36.36%)
Relational	Identifying	Intensive	are, is, are, are	4/22 (18.18%)
		Circumstantial	-	-
		Possessive	offering, offer	2/22 (9.09%)
	Attributive	Intensive	can, is, is, is, is	5/22 (22.73%)
		Circumstantial	is	1/22 (4.55%)
		Possessive	is	1/22 (4.55%)
Mental		seek out		1/22 (4.55%)

The visual analysis, especially those that stand out the most on the chosen web pages, was completed using compositional, and representational metafunctions. Subsequently, descriptive data on the images and language characteristics were presented. Lastly, Hall's cultural dimension of context technique (Hall, 2000; Hall & Hall, 1990) was applied to interpret the identified verbal and visual elements from an intercultural perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The multimodal analyses' findings are presented, followed by the cultural interpretation for each website.

MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS

The linguistic and visual analyses of Malaysian and Singaporean websites are presented in Table 3, which shows linguistic and visual realizations of representative and commissive communicative acts from the SFL metafunction. The linguistic analysis involved analytical tools of experiential and textual metafunctions, whilst representational and compositional metafunctions were used for visual analysis.

TABLE 3. Similarities and differences in linguistic and visual analyses of Malaysian and Singaporean websites respectively

Metafunction	Malaysian websites	Singaporean websites
	Linguistic realizations	
	+ Material processes **(89.5%)** + Relational processes **(16.5%)** + Mental **(13.3%)** + Existential **(22.2%)** + Verbal **(12.5%)** +Goal (medical tourism industry & services) +Actor (hospital) + Sayer	+ Material processes **(12.3%)** + Relational processes **(67.9%)** + Mental **(56.2%)** + Existential **(22.2%)** + Verbal **(12.5%)** +Actor (hospital (we), staff, patients) +Goal (hospital staff & service & patients)

Ideational: Experiential (Transitivity)	+Identifier (country, medical tourism attraction & services) +Carrier (medical tourists) +Attribute (medical tourists' experience) +phenomenon (Hospital services +Location (time, place) +Cause (purpose) +Manner (means)	+ Sayer +identified (services & hospital) +Identifier (hospital services & procedure) +phenomenon (expertise, patient's condition) +Location (place, time) +Cause (purpose)
Textual (Theme)	+ Unmarked themes **(89.9%)** + Marked themes **(56.9%)** +Interpersonal themes **(12.1%)** +Textual themes **(19.1%)** + Simple & multiple themes +Participants as themes +Reiteration **(98.2%)** +Zig-zag **(12.3%)** +Multiple **(87.3%)** +New **(56.1%)**	+ Unmarked themes **(98.1%)** + Marked themes **(87.4%)** +Interpersonal themes **(19.1%)** +Textual themes **(11.3%)** +Simple themes +Participants and process as themes + Reiteration **(87.4%)** +Zig-zag **(96.0%)** +Multiple **(46.7%)** +New **(49.1%)**
	Visual realizations	
Representational	+ Narrative structures **(87.2%)** +Human presence **(12.8%)**	+ Conceptual structures **(88.2%)** +Human presence **(11.8%)**
Compositional	+ Salience + Framing (The title and images of staff and patient & the hospital environment)	+ Salience (Prospective medical tourists, the facilities in the room) + Framing (Video title, Hospital environment/facilities)

In terms of ideational experiential language, Malaysian hospital websites predominantly utilize material processes, accounting for 89.5% of their content, whereas Singaporean hospital websites use material processes to a much lesser extent, with only 12.3%. Conversely, Singaporean hospital websites place a stronger emphasis on relational processes, constituting 67.9% of their content, while Malaysian hospital websites use relational processes to a lesser degree, at 16.5%. Meanwhile, the thematic organization is mainly unmarked in Malaysian (89.9%) and Singaporean (98.1%) websites. Interestingly, despite the limited number of marked themes used in Malaysian hospital websites, Singaporean hospital websites utilize a relatively high number of marked themes, constituting 87.4% of their content. For visual analysis, as shown in Figure 2, Malaysian hospital websites mainly consist of narrative structures with images of staff and patients and the hospital environment while Singaporean websites are mainly designed in conceptual structures, with the environment and facilities of the hospital.

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Malaysian Hospital Website ***Singaporean Hospital Website***

FIGURE 2. The most prominent visuals in selected Malaysian and Singaporean web pages

CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The multimodal promotional message and strategy's cultural traits and patterns are explained by the cultural analysis of the websites for Singapore and Malaysia which is shown in Table 4. The cultural dimension of context dependency proposed by Hall (2000) served as the foundation for the cultural analysis.

TABLE 4. Cultural analysis of Malaysian and Singaporean websites based on Hall's Context Dependency

Cultural Pattern	Cultural Features (Cultural Variability)	Verbal Realizations	Visual Realizations	Communicative Act	Verbal and visual mode construing high and low context
		MALAYSIA			
Low-context culture	Direct and explicit message	**Ideational** Short web page and text – easy access information Textual No interpersonal themes -impersonal Low new theme and clear thematic progression	**Representational** The images appeared subjective and very real. It is as if the viewer is standing there looking at the hospital staff.	**Commissive** Easy access information and easy to understand since the multimodal communicative act is straightforward.	**Relatively full:** The visuals attracted the senses, created a certain mood and motivation, while the texts supplied the strength of the private hospital through the hospital's location and history, and both modes were utilized in combination to deliver effective communicative acts to the
Low-context culture	Elaborated code system	**Ideational** Intensive material process – language informs. Intensive circumstances to offer as	**Compositional** No framing - all visual elements were connected.	**Representative Commissive** Material process describes the services and expertise offered by the hospitals while the absence of framing in the visuals conveys	

		background information.		the multimodal communicative acts. E.g: IJN *committed* to delivering advanced standards in cardiovascular and thoracic medicine.	potential medical tourists.
Low-context culture	Focalization of information	**Ideational** Low mental process. **Textual** Intensive unmarked themes. Intensive reiteration thematic pattern	**Compositional** Salient elements were visible using the bright color selection, big size visuals and also center-margin placement (Title, logo, caption, the staff and patient)	**Representative** The multimodal communicative acts are focused, where objectivity is chosen over sensation through low mental process and intensive unmarked themes. Clear thematic progression promotes interconnectedness of ideas.	
High-context culture	Emphasis on feelings	**Ideational** Participants are addressed mostly by the use of 'you' pronouns, 'patients' and 'travelers'.	**Representational** The participants are mostly human images and they appeared subjective and very real. It is as if the viewer is standing there looking at the hospital staff.	**Commissive** Both texts and visuals guide medical tourists by visitor-oriented messages.	
			SINGAPORE		
High-context culture	Non-linear organization	**Textual** Intensive high new themes-indicate the interruption of flow of ideas.	**Representational** Preference of 'left and right' visual organization	**Non representative** **Non commissive**	The verbal and visual modes used by the Singaporean website copywriters do not seem to work on the same level; the texts focalize, whereas the visuals generalize. Hence, the selected web pages in Singaporean set of websites are less multimodal since the use of images is not as detailed as its
Low-contact culture	Direct and explicit message	**Ideational** Short web page and text		**Representative** Easy access information	
Low-context culture	Elaborated code system	**Ideational** Intensive relational process.		**Representative** High relational process establishes the purpose of the text to identify and describe the private hospitals' attractions, making the texts to be more descriptive and informative. E.g: Everyone at Bumrungrad *is* responsible for safety.	

Low-context culture	Focalization of information	**Ideational** Low mental process **Textual** Intensive reiteration thematic pattern that promotes interconnectedness of ideas		**Representative** Mental process can hardly be seen to indicate that objectivity is chosen over sensation.	language. Text is dominantly utilized in Singaporean web pages.
Low-context culture	Highly structured message	**Ideational** Intensive circumstances elements. **Textual** Intensive unmarked themes promote objectivity & rather high marked themes		**Representative** High circumstances elements as background information reveals are mainly elaborated by location, spatial and temporal circumstances. E.g.: We can also provide advice on the estimated cost of treatments and procedures *at our hospitals.*	
High-context culture	Restricted code system		**Representational** Intensive 'dull' colored images that do not attract attention. Low modality – unclear visuals, limited lighting	**Non-representative** **Non-commissive**	

Table 4 summarizes the contextual features by revealing the frequency of cultural context discovered through the cultural analysis of Malaysian and Singaporean private hospital websites. The selected web pages contain both high and low context culture features, but they have different inclinations. The Malaysian web pages are mainly characterized by low-context cultures with all cultural context features such as focalization of information, direct and explicit messages, elaborated code systems, highly structured messages, and linear organization. In addition, since Malaysian web pages are centered on sentiments and have a simple message, they also have a limited number of contextual elements that are characteristic of high-context culture. On the other hand, Singaporean web pages blend elements of both kinds of cultures, with nearly equal proportions of high- and low-context cultural elements. However, in Singaporean-selected web pages, as though pointing to a visual contradiction with the theory consulted, the high-context civilizations are primarily found in the visual mode. According to Usunier and Roulin (2010), a high-context communication style may be detrimental to websites' appropriate design, making them ambiguous, less communicative, and boring. The cultural interpretation of the different promotional strategies used by the website copywriters has shown that the two countries are not

consistent with the literature on intercultural communication. The deviation from the cultural classification that exists in the Malaysian and Singaporean web pages, supports the claim that cultures are "dynamic, continuously developing, and evolving" (Neuliep 2020, p. 45) and may be influenced by different factors.

The analysis suggests that Malaysian and Singaporean cultures may exhibit greater adaptability during periods of change. According to Neuliep (2020), cultural shifts may be indicated by the observed deviations from the usual patterns. The cultural ebbs and flows of globalization, the globalization of English, and the internal reorganizations of politics, the economy, and society in Malaysia and Singapore all serve as explanations for these disparities. Additionally, they highlight the tendency of cultural patterns that could be impacted by the communication environment (types of promotion) as well as the communication medium (the Internet). One may also argue that global mobilization and the widespread usage of the English language have an impact on Malaysian culture. This result is consistent with a study by Lailawati (2005) that investigated Malaysian Malay style context communication. Her research showed that Malay communication is evolving from high-context to low-context, and she concluded that this is due to global mobilization, where people travel to different nations and absorb new perspectives and behaviors that they then integrate into their values. Nevertheless, Lailawati's research was limited to Malays. The current research encompasses not just Malays but also other dominant ethnicities that follow their cultural history, such as Indians and Chinese, to promote the nation's businesses online to a global audience. As a consequence of the three cultures' blending and mixing, the study's findings about cultural deviance in Malaysian communication can be linked to the emergence of a "new culture". This is in line with Wan Fatimah Solihah's (2021b) study that claimed Global English language usage, global mobilization, and the impact of cultural and communicational shifts brought about by the growth of Malaysian multiracial communities could all have an impact on Malaysian culture.

Singaporean communication styles, while generally exhibiting high-context cultural traits, particularly in visual communication preferences among copywriters, also displayed instances of low-context communication patterns in the linguistic mode. These linguistic patterns may be influenced by recent changes in politics, the economy, and society over the past decades and/or external factors such as globalization. The properties and methods of the communication medium and setting appear to be the reason for the deviations from the predicted features of the cultural context. The results of a thorough multimodal analysis demonstrate how several factors interact in complicated ways on the websites of private hospitals in Malaysia and Singapore.

A MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATIVE FRAMEWORK FROM AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

This study proposes a communicative strategy framework based on the multimodal and intercultural analysis of private hospital websites in promoting online medical tourism in Figure 3. The reciprocal arrow at the top of Figure 3 shows that culture and multimodal communication are interdependent. Culture can be linked to the metafunctions given in the proposed model since it both influences and is influenced by speech (Şerbănescu, 2007). The following highlights the connections that exist between them. Experience is stored differently by language and visual systems, so people's worldviews, prejudices, and beliefs are indicated by the experienced meaning in ideational metafunction. Examining these systems may provide important insights into the way these worldviews are organized and conveyed. Finally, the textual meaning shows how information is organized and focused.

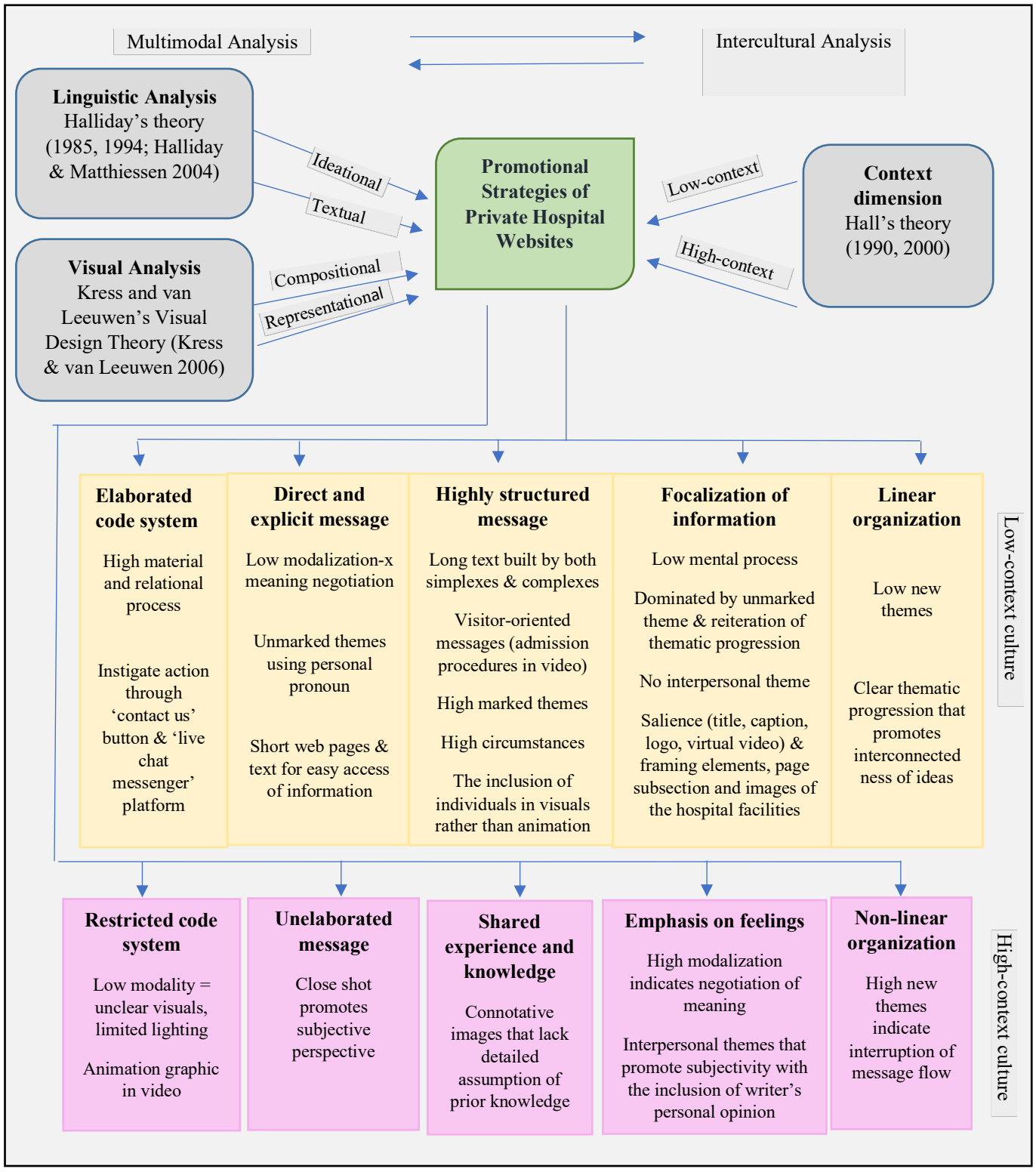


FIGURE 3. A promotional strategy framework based on the multimodal and intercultural analysis of private hospital websites in promoting online medical tourism

The multimodal communicative act of representative and commissive, as a result of the combined modes, were organized, cohesive, and intuitive, providing attractive, colored, and informative web pages. Their multimodal and educational message is arranged and presented comparably by their straightforward and uncomplicated style. The language conveyed is sophisticated, well-organized, assertive, global, impartial, and targeted at the private hospitals that are being pushed. The texts are more descriptive and educational since relational identification processes are also frequently used, which establishes the text's goal of identifying and describing the attractions of private hospitals. This marketing strategy, which is associated with a low-context culture, has a highly structured message and complex coding. The same is true of the image: the private hospital, the staff, and the medical tourists, or parts of it, were presented for contemplation outside the viewers' world, but in their reach. The users were shown, informed, and invited to visit the private hospitals. The attractions in the offers are similar: the doctors' expertise, hospital facilities, advanced technology, and patients' needs. However, each country's website copywriters offered a different focus.

The differences between the web pages from these two countries can be summarized as follows. The Malaysian selected web pages contained a fair use of verbal and visual modes where the multimodal communicative acts primarily informed and subsequently demonstrated and described things to see, where the aim was to persuade. As for the Singaporean set, the web pages relied on both modes to illustrate, but more on the verbal one to keep the readers informed. Its message is still informative, involved, and centered on private hospital facilities and services, which ought to entice, convince, and drive users to schedule a visit with the medics. The similarities between the selected web pages from these two countries appeared to be related to the websites' promotional functions and organization of their private hospitals; however, the way they promoted it showed differences.

The Malaysian-selected web pages were as informative and suggestive as possible while remaining impersonal and objective. Focalization of information is reflected when mental processes rarely appear in all selected private hospital web pages. This promotional strategy indicates that objectivity is chosen over sensations as in low-context culture. Their message centered on the medical tourism promotion of the respective country apart from the promotion of private hospitals. However, the promotional messages of both Malaysian and Singaporean private hospitals were compact, clear, and persuasive and were presented from the position of a close and friendly expert. Their selected web pages were also oriented toward the medical tourists by directly addressing them as *"patients", "medical tourists"* or using the pronoun *"you"* in both texts and captions in the visuals to invite them to visit the private hospitals of the respective country to get treatment. The information on the website was also composed of declarative texts where information is presented as fact by means of statements. This promotional strategy does not allow any room for negotiation and thus indicates a direct and explicit message.

While the Malaysian selected web pages were both linguistically and visually focused, the Singaporean multimodal communicative act depended more on the verbal than the visual. The language in the web pages of the Singaporean private hospitals guides prospective international medical tourists and describes briefly the services available in the hospitals to persuade the users to visit the hospitals for treatment. The linguistic message was shorter but mainly elaborated by adding relational processes, varied circumstances, and marked themes. Restricted code systems are phrased from more limited alternatives with collapsed and shortened sentences. The Singaporean-selected webpages also presented its unstructured and less focused message by presenting connotative layouts and colors and unrepresentative visuals.

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Additionally, the Singaporean-selected web pages provided something more advanced by having virtual videos on their web pages to help users get a clearer picture of the facilities and expertise offered by the private hospitals. Such videos help to persuade prospective medical tourists to book the treatment slot by projecting the medical tourists into the actual scene of the visit. Virtual tour casts the prospective medical tourists directly into the destination. The images on the Singaporean private hospital web pages appeared more professional and impressive, with special attention paid to the visual brand. These examples of highly structured web pages also present visitor-oriented messages, particularly through the admission procedures in video the patient's character as the focus. Singapore also promotes interactivity in their web pages through the 'live chat messenger'. Nonetheless, Malaysian web pages do not provide these features to ease the audience's understanding, and this can be seen as an unelaborated message.

The multimodal communicative act of representative and commissive identified from the contrastive analysis of the Malaysian and Singaporean selected web pages as well as the comparison between these private hospital websites have indicated some similarities and differences. Language and imagery were used differently, even though the focus was on the same iconic qualities, due to the promotion strategy. Promoting the respective country was the common goal shared by all the chosen websites, whether directly or indirectly. The analyses have shown that the multimodal communicative strategies highlight both the identity of the origin countries and the expertise and facilities of the hospitals. These strategies are aligned with Woo and Schwartz's (2014) study that emphasizes that both domestic and international patients need information on the medical facilities and their array of expertise, services, treatments, and equipment. The private hospitals, which act as national assets of a country, probably include professionals and thus, are very aware of the importance of branding and marketing. This study on the use of multimedia for promoting online medical tourism has revealed an interesting finding, that of the different possible ways language and image may combine and their effects on the users which would be of value to these professionals. It has been determined that there are three possible outcomes, either mode may complement and expand the other, each mode may generate a distinct message yet guide the recipient in the same direction, and each mode may generate messages that are so unlike one another as to be incompatible overall.

In summary, this study's theoretical framework has allowed the analysis to extend from the micro level, focusing on specific language and imagery traits, to the macro level, addressing broader cultural interpretations. This approach has helped explain how various choices and their combinations in promotional messages produce different effects. These can be revealing for a wide array of fields, from online communication to strategies for building a country's medical tourism brand and promoting it internationally to studies of national and cultural communication patterns. Specifically, the study supports previous findings claiming that promotional websites can be effectively analyzed in a multimodal and cultural manner (Stoian, 2018). A better understanding of the power of language and image and how they interact with each other to represent and compose meaning, as well as of the different cultural and contextual communication styles, can make the online promotion of medical tourism more successful. All these strategies have been found to contribute to the successful construction and promotion of medical tourism in the countries studied through the respective private hospital websites.

This study is a mediocre-scale comparison study and focuses on the function of each word utilized in the promotional texts on how they make meaning in relation to their verbal and visual codes. Therefore, only selected sections of three webpages, from each website (two websites for

each country) were chosen for each hospital website to be analyzed. Therefore, the findings are not representative of the respective countries.

CONCLUSION

In today's global economy, where competition is fierce, businesses, particularly those in the medical tourism sector, need to focus not just on local but also worldwide markets. This is the reason why some scholars emphasize the importance of "global communicative competence" in marketing strategies and practices in corporate environments (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). In order to tackle this global communicative competence issue, this study compared the selected web pages of private hospitals from two leading countries in Southeast Asia, namely Malaysia, and Singapore, focusing on the medical tourism industry to find out if some specific cultural traits can be identified in the expression of the multimodal features.

The study's adoption of the two-phase framework shows that SFL analysis is not confined to discourse analysis only in order to reveal multimodal communicative acts of representative and commissive, but SFL can also be combined with the cultural analysis to identify the emerging communication pattern from a cultural perspective, from one of Hall's cultural context dimensions. The analyses revealed that elements such as an elaborated code system, an explicit message, a highly organized message, the focalization of information, and a linear organization, were included in the websites from Singapore and Malaysia and these elements are typically seen in low-context cultures. These findings did not align with the prevailing intercultural communication literature, which commonly associates Asian countries with high-context cultures as indicated in the literature. Consequently, this study highlights the importance of selecting an appropriate framework and analytical approach that closely aligns with the context and purpose of the study.

The multimodal and cultural interpretation analysis in this study has demonstrated a multitude of possible messages encoded in language and images. The findings highlight how intricate communication can be and how even minor modifications to a multimodal text's characteristics can result in an entirely different meaning. Communication is about making choices; the message that is sent is the result of all those decisions. A website's success greatly depends on how language and pictures work together to create a representative and commissive multimodal act that communicates meaning in cross-cultural contexts.

Therefore, it is vital for website stakeholders, promoters, and copywriters to recognize that producing compelling and effective websites is a challenging endeavor. They should have a good understanding of the communicative strategies employed by medical tourism websites, encompassing the creation of meaning through both imagery and text, along with its potential cultural interpretations. Working together to promote tourism online requires a highly diversified team of experts in marketing, computer communication, graphics, and English.

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