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# Bouncing from the Covid-19 Pandemic: Response of an Online Medical Tourism Facilitator Platform

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## Abstract

People have increasingly engaged in medical tourism to find effective medical treatments but more economical overseas. These travellers use the service of online Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTFs) in choosing and arranging medical trips. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and the ban on international travelling disrupted travel and thus seriously affected the tourism businesses, including MTFs. Businesses need to be resilient and pivot their business models to survive and bounce back from the crisis. However, it is less clear how MTFs navigate this Covid-19 pandemic. This paper adopts a case study to explain how an online MTF platform (Dental Departures) responds to the opportunities and challenges and examines how it pivots business models.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, people have increasingly travelled to other countries to receive medical treatments, referred to as *medical tourism* [1,2]. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (WTO) & European Travel Commission (ETC), medical tourism is defined as “tourism activities, involving the use of evidence-

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based medical healing resources and services, both invasive and non-invasive, for diagnosis, treatment, cure, prevention, and rehabilitation” [1]. It is enabled by a combination of unstoppable forces, such as the advance of healthcare technologies [2,3], internet access [4], the availability of low-cost travel [5], and most importantly, the price competitiveness of foreign medical providers [3,6,7]. The market size of medical tourism has ballooned in the past few years, reaching US\$100 billion in 2018 [1].

In general, there are six types of popular treatments among travellers, namely elective surgery (e.g., heart bypass/hip replacement), weight loss procedures (bariatric operation), cosmetic and plastic surgery, dental care, vision (LASIK operation), and fertility treatment [3]. However, dental care is one of the most pervasive reasons for travellers seeking medical services overseas (Fisher & Sood, 2014). Typically, travellers evaluate and identify foreign medical providers that they can trust from a vast source of information before making decisions for medical tourism. They need to make a series of arrangements, such as trips, documentation preparation, and a rehabilitation plan. These activities sometimes can be challenging and stressful for many travellers [8]. Thus Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTFs) become a key actor in this process that links patients to foreign medical providers with all necessary supporting information and resources [9].

MTFs provide assurance and logistical services for the customers, such as promoting legitimate medical providers, arranging logistics and documentation, arranging travelling and concierge service, and following up after the treatment [10]. MTFs can be in the form of an individual or a standalone organisation (e.g., health insurers, foreign hospitals, and clinics), relying on their information channels, such as websites, to promote medical tourism [11,12]. The other form of MTFs is agent-based MTFs collaborating with large and small medical providers, hotels, travel agents, offering a stress-free package for medical treatments and tourist activities [4,13]. To better supply various information, some MTFs have made a step further by establishing an online platform (such as Medical Tourism Corporation and Dental Departures) that functions as a one-stop service hub of medical tourism for trip planning and coordination [9,14].

Similar to many businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector, medical tourism has been severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic as MTFs cannot fully operate and generate revenues due to the restrictive measures of lockdown and international travel ban at the height of the crisis. As a result, many medical tourism providers have to become resilient by pivoting their business models to sustain their operation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Guillen [15] suggested three conditions for a successful pivoting during the crisis: (1) firms need to align their business with a long-term trend of their industry, (2) the new business or a pivoting strategy must support or extend the capabilities of their business, and (3) pivoting activities should enhance brand value and create sustainable profits in the long run. Theoretically important as the efforts are, limited practical information has been available to shed light on the situation for the medical tourism industry, especially MTFs, coping with the unprecedented pandemic in the tourism and hospitality sector. Thus, this paper endeavours to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on MTF businesses and explore opportunities and challenges from Covid-19. Moreover, this paper seeks to understand how MTFs navigate the lockdown and adapt their business operations amidst the recovery. Specifically, this study examines how and to what extent MTFs have pivoted their business models during this period.

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, we adopt a case study approach based on a global MTF – Dental Departures headquartered in Singapore to conduct the research activities. Dental Departure is chosen as an ideal case for the study to illustrate this phenomenon because it has operated as a global online platform well before the pandemic and has been in operation (as of December 2021). Thus, the case can provide insights into the impacts of covid-19 and how it pivots and build resilience during the Covid disruption.

We outline the relevant literature in the next section. Then we discuss the justification of the selected method, data collection and data analysis. We list several key expected contributions of the research to conclude the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Medical Tourism: Push and Pull Factors

Medical tourism is part of *health tourism* – a type of tourism activity by which travellers have primary motivation to improve their physical, mental, spiritual health by engaging in medical and wellness-based activities [1]. It can be categorised based on the types of medical treatment: obligatory and elective treatments [16]. The former is the illegal or unavailable treatments (e.g., organ transplants, fertilisation, and abortion) in their home country; thus, travellers

need to receive these treatments in other countries. Elective treatments tend to be critical but non-urgent, such as heart bypass surgery or hip replacement surgery, cosmetic surgeries, and dental care. In the past, medical tourism tended to travel from developed economies to developing ones where the costs of medical treatments are significantly lower (i.e., North-South tourism)[2]. Apart from the price competitiveness, people in the developed economies may travel to their home countries due to the cultural familiarity, language, and trust factors. This type of travel is defined as “diasporic medical travel.” For example, Korean Americans in the US travel back to Korea for medical treatments. However, nowadays, more people engage in medical treatments in their neighbouring countries (i.e., South-South tourism). For instance, many Indonesians travelled to Malaysia to receive medical treatments [17]. Also, well-to-do patients in developing economies increasingly seek advanced medical treatments in developed economies (e.g. the US and European countries).

Regarding the push factors of medical tourism, the long waiting time and expensive costs drive middle-class and non-insured patients to seek medical tourism options [9]. Employers and health insurers in developed countries also encourage people to get elective medical treatments overseas to save healthcare costs. For instance, Blue Cross Blue Shield partnered with Bumrungrad Hospital in Thailand and referred patients to the hospital [3]. Similarly, the European Union issued a directive 2011/24/EU that allowed its citizens to use health services overseas and reimburse medical expenses [18]. As for the pull factors, perceived value for medical tourism is high due to the price reasonableness [7,19]. For instance, a heart bypass surgery in India provided 92 per cent savings compared with the surgery operated in the US [3]. Medical tourism providers in developing countries have achieved international accreditations and provided world-class quality services [20]. These providers have invested in advanced medical technologies, hired medical staff who have medical training in the US and Europe [13]. Patients receive stress-free packaged services [4] and tend to be satisfied with the friendliness and attentiveness of medical staff [21].

## 2.2 Medical Tourism Facilitators (MTFs)

MTFs usually function as information gatekeepers in medical tourism; they tend to be used by first-time health travellers [9]. Apart from MTFs, the supply chain of medical tourism comprises many players ranging from hotels, medical providers (e.g., hospitals and clinics), travel agents, and insurance companies) [1]. The higher cooperation between MTFs and other players in medical tourism (e.g., visa application, accommodations, tourist package and attractions), the better for customer experience and seamless travel experience [8,22]. The customer satisfaction with the MTFs services resulted in repeated customers and the continuous growth of the medical tourism industry[23]. In one country (e.g., the US), there can be both domestic MTFs (e.g., domestic health care providers) and foreign/global MTFs (e.g., Medical Tourism Corporation and Dental Departures) competing and linking patients to their foreign medical partners [3]. Gan and Frederic [3] identified three types of MTF in the US based on their specialised services: (1) MTFs that offer a wide range of medical treatments and destinations, (2) MTFs focusing on specific medical treatments (e.g., dental care, elective surgery), and (3) MTFs specialising in the tourism aspect [3].

MTFs use various marketing channels (e.g., website, social media, online platform, apps and brochures in the exhibition and roadshow) to promote their services [22]. Their marketing messages focus on positive customer experience and benefits whilst downplaying risks (e.g., legal issues and medical complications after the trip) of medical tourism. Large private hospitals typically use their website to provide information about the hospital, procedures, and fees. However, they tend to have limited online-interactive tools such as live chat boxes with staff, and most of their websites may not be suitable for visibly-impaired people [11,12]. Unlike large hospitals, small clinics have limited capacity to do marketing and search engine optimisation, and thus they have fewer reaches to potential customers [13]. Therefore, they tend to partner with MTFs platform to reach a broader customer base.

## 3. Research Method

Considering the complex, changing, and understudied nature of the MTFs in the Covid-19 context, we adopt a qualitative case study approach. Qualitative research has proved useful in shedding light on individual actors and surrounding contexts [24]. Rich qualitative data also facilitate a deep and exploratory analysis needed to understand how MTFs respond amidst the pandemic crisis.

We aim to examine an online global MTF (Dental Departures) and examine how it responds to the Covid-19 pandemic. A single case study method [25] is adopted in this research primarily for two reasons. First, dental treatment

is the most frequent one that patients engage in medical tourism. Thus, it can be an exemplary case to illustrate the medical tourism phenomenon that showcases the complexity faced by MTFs in the Covid situation [26]. Secondly, as dental treatments are the most popular medical tourism practice, rich data about dental tourism is readily available data to help us better understand the context of how Dental Departures navigate this pandemic. For these reasons, focusing on a single case on an online MTF in Dental Tourism is suitable and practically feasible for our search objectives.

The research necessitates the collection of primary data due to the focused scope of the research relating to dental tourism and the exploratory and unexplored nature of the study. We thus adopt the “between-method” triangulation to enhance the richness of the data from semi-structured interviews with Dental Departures and a number of dental service providers and content analysis of a wide range of secondary documents [27], such as company report, meeting minutes, and correspondence between Dental Departures and the service providers. We follow a three-stage data analysis process of open, axial, and selective coding [28], which will be conducive to the discovery of illuminating academic findings.

#### 4. Expected Contributions

Several contributions are envisaged from the project. Theoretically, the research aspires to generate insight into how businesses in the medical tourism sector respond to the disruption caused by the Covid- pandemic. The study will uncover evidence-based findings to highlight the possible pivotal role of MTFs in the focal industry facing the uncertainty and challenges amidst the pandemic. From a practical perspective, this study will attempt to provide recommendations for MTFs and medical tourism practitioners to transform their digital platforms in adverse economic times. Furthermore, the findings and insights from this study may inform policymakers and governmental agencies in creating policy measures needed by the tourism and hospitality businesses to better cope with the Covid-19 and future crisis.

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