

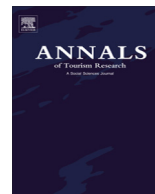


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Medical tourism in tango paradise: The internet branding of cosmetic surgery in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the online marketing literature that promotes Argentina as a rising destination for cosmetic surgeries. The surgical production of “body capital” is branded as an investment practice towards increasing one’s value in the global market economy. Online advertisers portray Argentina as a familiar place where foreigners can feel “at home” due to an assumed “cultural affinity” (i.e., racial, ethnic and cultural similarities) with their Argentine hosts. Argentines are depicted as surgically enhanced role models to be imitated by their foreign visitors. The notion of sensual exoticism is advertised via tango products—from taking lessons to watching tango shows—as a unique component of the cosmetic surgery package that brands improved physical appearance with enhanced sex appeal.

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Introduction

“Tango, European architecture, cultural places, historical tours, an exquisite cuisine and a wide array of comfortable accommodation facilities, along with tourist attractions unique to South America, will turn your health trip into a true tourist destination. There is a lot to discover, to know and enjoy. We invite you to try a different trip.” (*AestheticUp*, 2012).

“Shopping, nightlife, restaurants, clubs, there is no shortage of things for the tourist to do. Argentina’s love of music (including the famously sexy tango), food (you won’t get a better steak

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anywhere) and general hedonism is well known! And of course, everything in Argentina is noticeably cheaper than you would expect to pay in the US or Europe.” ([Cheaper Cosmetic Surgery Abroad, 2012](#)).

These quotes represent the standard pitches utilized by medical tourism companies to promote Argentina as a unique cosmetic surgery destination. Their shared themes aim to attract potential travelers to experience Argentina’s pleasures while receiving lower-cost, high-quality medical care—from breast implants to bariatric surgery. Whereas until recently so-called medical tourists were mostly the Third World wealthy journeying to developed countries for care, this route has largely been reversed ([Merrell et al., 2008](#)). Medical tourism is now a globalized industry aided by lower labor costs, advanced telecommunications, and an information revolution that allows the transmission of medical records to distant places in mere seconds ([Bookman & Bookman, 2007](#); [Connell, 2006](#); [Whittaker, 2008](#)).

A spate of publications targeting potential health travelers reflects this trend—from handbooks offering advice on how to choose the best medical vacation to online cost-comparison charts. The social science literature has followed suit by addressing the “tour-and-cure” trend in articles and reports in social science journals such as *Annals of Tourism Research* ([Clarke, 2010](#); [Garcia-Altes, 2005](#); [Joppe, 2012](#)), with special issues devoted to the topic including *Anthropology & Medicine* ([Naraindas & Bastos, eds., 2011](#)), *Medical Anthropology* ([Smith-Morris & Manderson, eds., 2010](#)) and *Signs* ([Mazzaschi & McDonald, eds., 2011](#)). Much of this literature provides a critical lens to our understanding of offshore health services in tandem with rising global health inequalities ([Smith-Morris & Manderson, 2010](#); [Sobo, 2009](#); [Sobo, Herlihy, & Bicker, 2011](#); [Weisz, 2011](#)).

Despite the various terms used to define medical tourism practices—including cross-border travel, medical travel, and reproductive exile or travel ([Kangas, 2007, 2011](#); [Scheper-Hughes, 2000](#); [Whittaker & Speier, 2010](#))—one thing is clear: Most commercial intermediaries, doctors, and clinics heavily rely on the Internet to advertise their products, recruit potential clients, and win new markets for their services ([Lunt, Hardey, & Mannion, 2010](#)). The growth in Internet-based medical advertising has reinforced the notion of patients as consumers free to buy any products (including specialized surgeries) in an increasingly mobile global marketplace ([Smith-Morris & Manderson, 2010](#)).

This paper reflects the growing scholarly interest in the advertising strategies of the medical tourism industry as shown by studies on its Internet messages ([Crooks, Turner, Snyder, Johnston, & Kingsbury, 2011](#); [Lunt et al., 2010](#); [Nassab et al., 2010](#); [Whittaker, 2008](#)). Aside from the literature on reproductive tourism and general marketing trends ([Smith, Behrmann, Martin, & Williams-Jones, 2010](#); [Viladrich & Baron-Faust, 2010, 2012](#)) and recent works on medical and cosmetic practices ([Masi de Casanova & Sutton, 2013](#); [McDonald, 2011](#)), there has been little research on medical tourism in Argentina. This article fills that gap by exploring the promotional pitches utilized by the online cosmetic tourism literature that advertises plastic surgery packages in Argentina. The cosmetic enhancement market represents a multibillion-dollar industry that caters to growing numbers of patient-consumers around the world ([Lunt et al., 2010](#)). While a handful of developing countries have become top destinations for aesthetic procedures, notably Thailand and India, most Americans and Europeans opt for shorter flights to Central and South America, particularly Brazil and Argentina, where cut-rate aesthetic surgery and fertility treatments are a major draw despite the lack of international accreditation of many health facilities ([Burkett, 2007](#)).

An unprecedented devaluation of the Argentine national currency in the early 2000s provoked a tourism boom that attracted foreign companies to Argentina, eager to launch lucrative medical facilities in the cosmetic market ([McDonald, 2011](#); [Merritt, 2012](#)). These investments ultimately paid off: Argentina ranks eleventh among countries with the most surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures ([ISAPS, 2012](#)) and fifth in demand for cosmetic surgery procedures in the Americas and the Caribbean ([Parker, 2009](#)). Over 300,000 cosmetic procedures (including 60,000 breast implant surgeries) are performed in Argentina annually at internationally competitive prices ([InvestBA, 2012](#)). Yet, price alone is not enough to lure medical tourists to a distant land for the purpose of undergoing potentially dangerous aesthetic procedures ([Crooks et al., 2011](#)). The combining of highly rated medical care with pleasure travel is no simple equation; savvy marketers know this and therefore

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