



Spanish hospitals' online branding content strategies

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ABSTRACT

Building a reputable brand constitutes a priority for hospitals since it improves their relationships with stakeholders. However, these organizations face several challenges: strict legal frameworks, evolving patient needs, and advances in medical technology. This paper analyzes the online content strategies of Spanish hospitals to promote their brands through their websites. We conducted a literature review on digital hospitals and their communication and branding efforts on online platforms. Then, we defined 40 brand indicators to evaluate how Spain's 100 best hospitals used their websites to reinforce their relationships with stakeholders and promote their brands. Our results revealed that most hospitals had sections on their websites for healthcare professionals (77.50%), patients (86.25%), media companies (93.75%), and shareholders (98.75%); however, they respected, on average, only 13.15 criteria out of 40 applicable criteria. We concluded that Spanish hospitals should professionalize their online content strategies, better integrate their stakeholders into branding processes, and include more emotional, social, and cultural elements.

Keywords: hospitals, corporate communication, brand, content strategy, websites

INTRODUCTION

Health communication experts in hospitals implement corporate communication initiatives to build reputable brands that help those organizations improve their relationships with stakeholders: employees, patients, media companies, shareholders, public health authorities, policymakers, and suppliers. However, these organizations face several challenges that make it difficult to succeed in their branding efforts: patients' new emotional and medical needs, doctors' and nurses' new professional backgrounds, strict legal and ethical frameworks, and the difficulty of promoting scientific concepts. Despite those challenges, hospitals are increasingly investing in corporate communication, as the brand is essential for both their internal and external processes. In this framework, many hospitals use their websites to make their corporate communication initiatives more dynamic, thereby enhancing their branding efforts.

This paper analyzes how Spanish hospitals use their websites to implement content strategies to promote their brands. In other words, we sought to answer the following research question: Which online content strategies do Spanish hospitals use to enhance their branding efforts? This research's novelty lies in analyzing Spanish hospitals' corporate websites as whole branding elements rather than as information platforms. To answer our research question, we conducted a literature review about digital hospitals, their online communication initiatives, and their online branding efforts. This literature review addressed an essential gap for hospitals: how to integrate artificial and big data into health communication to develop more efficient online initiatives that help hospitals build credible brands. Based on this literature review, we identified 40 brand indicators that hospitals should follow to efficiently implement online content strategies that help them build credible brands. Then, we used *Newsweek's* and *Statista's world's best hospitals 2024* ranking to identify

the 100 best hospitals in Spain. Subsequently, we quantitatively analyzed whether they met the 40 brand indicators. Finally, we presented our results, limitations, research avenues, and three conclusions, along with practical recommendations for Spanish hospitals to improve their online branding efforts.

HOSPITALS' ONLINE BRANDING EFFORTS

Digital Hospitals

Artificial intelligence in healthcare refers to the use of machine learning algorithms and deep learning techniques to analyze patients' medical data and, in turn, diagnose their diseases more efficiently (Morte Ferrer, 2021). This technology has great potential to improve the quality of clinical care: diagnoses, treatments, prognosis, and patient monitoring (Manrique de Lara & Peláez-Ballestas, 2020). Artificial intelligence-based healthcare initiatives are beneficial for patients with chronic conditions, as they enable them to perform specific medical tasks conveniently and without compromising quality (Hager et al., 2021). Finally, artificial intelligence also helps patients participate more actively in the healthcare system and reinforces their empowerment (Kaissis et al., 2020). Despite these advantages, using artificial intelligence also represents several risks for hospitals. On the one hand, some patients are concerned about privacy risks associated with medical information, such as patient records, diagnoses, and treatments (Lin & Hou, 2020). On the other hand, some hospitals are concerned about hackers who could compromise their security systems and use patients' information for criminal activities (Tseng et al., 2020).

Concerning big data, this term refers to large data sets intended for computational analysis that can be used to advance medical research by revealing trends and associations (Howe & Elenberg, 2020). This technology supports various medical functions, including clinical decision-making, disease surveillance, and patient health management (Minou et al., 2020). Big data also helps doctors and nurses analyze survival curves more efficiently and make faster, more informed decisions (Bonomi et al., 2020). In other words, this technology enables hospitals to improve quality, reduce costs, and build new relationships with patients by providing high-quality information and enabling shared decision-making (Holmes et al., 2018). However, implementing big data in hospitals faces two barriers. First, some doctors and nurses lack the skills to use this technology for medical purposes, which makes it challenging to integrate big data into hospitals' medical protocols (Quinn et al., 2019). Second, some hospitals have not yet implemented security systems to avoid unauthorized access, errors, and secondary use of patients' information (Tseng et al., 2020).

The development of artificial intelligence and big data has led hospitals to create new technological environments in which doctors, nurses, and patients creatively integrate tools such as the Internet of Things, medical cyber-physical systems, health clouds, machine learning, blockchain, and smart algorithms (Al-Jaroodi et al., 2020). Hospitals follow several principles to efficiently use these technological tools: respecting patients' privacy, using informed consent, and establishing standard procedures (Zegers et al., 2021). One of the main initiatives pursued by those organizations is mobile health, namely the use of smartphones and their applications for disease prediction and patient self-management of health (Dang et al., 2021). This technology is especially beneficial for patients with chronic diseases, as they can use mobile applications to collect and monitor their health data, thereby improving self-management (Ni et al., 2021). In other words, smartphones are becoming sources of information and decision-support tools for clinicians and patients (Tangari et al., 2021).

Hospitals' Online Communication Initiatives

Health communication refers to using social and behavioral models to help people achieve better health outcomes, including healthy habits, informed decisions, and knowledge about health risks (Mheidly & Fares, 2020). Health communication experts aim to educate citizens and reinforce their empowerment and health literacy skills (De Las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020). In this framework, more and more hospitals have established in-house corporate communication departments where experts from different areas (communication, social sciences, medicine, nursing, and public health) analyze the influence of communication on health and illness (Kreps, 2020). Based on those analyses, health communication experts implement various initiatives to influence perceptions among the hospital's internal and external stakeholders (Zhao, 2021). These initiatives align with the organization's business priorities, stakeholders' information rights, and the country's ethical and

legal frameworks (Merminod & Benaroyo, 2021). When hospitals follow this professional logic, they establish long-term relationships with their stakeholders (Khosravizadeh et al., 2021).

Hospitals implement various communication activities, both internally and externally. The most crucial one remains interpersonal communication, as it determines how patients, nurses, and doctors interact and make decisions (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2020). Healthcare professionals' interpersonal communication skills are associated with patients' medical outcomes (Butow & Hoque, 2020), which is why hospitals train their doctors and nurses in this area (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). For instance, some of these training sessions analyze how empathy and emotional intelligence skills influence doctors' and patients' communication relationships (Driever et al., 2020). Thanks to these sessions, healthcare professionals and patients improve their interpersonal communication skills, thereby facilitating collective decision-making processes (Wang et al., 2020). In other words, thanks to interpersonal communication, patients and healthcare professionals develop a new healthcare paradigm based on trust, knowledge, and mutual respect (Altun, 2021; Tong et al., 2021).

Besides interpersonal communication, hospitals use online platforms—such as websites and social media—to engage with internal and external stakeholders (Farsi, 2021). Online websites remain hospitals' primary corporate communication tool because they allow these organizations to share medical, educational, and business information, thereby influencing stakeholders' perceptions (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2020). For instance, this online content enhances employees' sense of belonging to the organization, which is essential, as most are brand ambassadors who interact directly with patients and their relatives (Lithopoulos et al., 2021). Additionally, hospitals' websites help patients strengthen their health literacy, thereby improving their communication with doctors and nurses (Odoom et al., 2019). In other words, hospital websites play a key role in enhancing doctor-patient communication, which positively affects patients' medical outcomes and perceptions of the organization (Zhu et al., 2020). For this reason, hospitals increasingly focus their communication efforts on their websites and integrate them into some medical protocols (Chou, 2021; Yu et al., 2021).

To efficiently promote their brands on their websites, hospitals develop annual content plans aligned with their brand architecture and their stakeholders' information needs (Bol et al., 2020). Annual content plans play a key role by enhancing hospitals' credibility across medical, scientific, and business perspectives; they also help make these organizations' brands more dynamic (Yantian et al., 2022). For this reason, doctors and nurses actively collaborate in designing and implementing annual content plans: their scientific credibility is essential to promoting hospitals' brands (Zhang et al., 2021). In some cases, healthcare professionals integrate corporate websites into medical protocols; for example, they ask patients to consult the hospital's website to read medical content about their treatments and diseases (Team et al., 2020). This online information is beneficial for patients with chronic conditions and those undergoing surgery (Steves & Scafide, 2021). In other words, hospitals' websites have become credible sources of information that shape healthcare professionals' activities, patients' medical outcomes, and hospitals' brand reputation (Rowland et al., 2020).

On the other hand, in addition to using websites, hospitals train their healthcare professionals to use social media for corporate communication purposes. In this way, these employees become brand ambassadors able to influence stakeholders' perceptions (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2020). When hospitals adopt this logic and utilize their websites and social media platforms to enhance their corporate communication strategies, they establish long-term relationships with stakeholders and reinforce their brands (Huo et al., 2019; Odoom et al., 2019).

Hospitals' Online Branding Initiatives

Health communication experts' primary responsibility is building a reputable brand that stakeholders trust and that helps hospitals reinforce their strategic positioning in the healthcare industry (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2020). The hospital brand includes four main dimensions: brand identity, tangible elements, healthcare professionals' credentials, and quality of medical services (Odoom et al., 2019). These elements must be consistent with the organization's original roots and social heritage; otherwise, stakeholders cannot perceive the brand as authentic (Rindell & Santos, 2021). Finally, the hospital brand must also integrate sociocultural elements that help the organization establish emotional connections with its stakeholders (Tsai et al., 2021). Once hospitals have defined their brand and its strategic elements, they resort to creativity and storytelling

to develop corporate communication activities that convey brand values (Lithopoulos et al., 2021) and foster stakeholders' trust in the organization (Adebesin & Mwalugha, 2020).

To efficiently achieve that goal, most hospitals have implemented an in-house corporate communication department where public health, technology, and communication experts define and implement online communication initiatives that reinforce the organization's brand (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2020). All those experts follow professional processes and protocols, which means that before implementing any communication initiative, they research stakeholders' perceptions and behaviors (Odoom et al., 2019). Based on those research results, health communication experts define online strategies that align with the organization's brand positioning (Zhang et al., 2021). These strategies highlight the hospital's central values and include facts proving why stakeholders should trust the brand (Basha et al., 2022). Finally, health communication experts use quantitative and qualitative indicators to evaluate the impact of each online communication initiative on the hospital's brand value (Khosravizadeh et al., 2021). When health communication experts follow this logic, they build a credible brand that helps the organization achieve its business goals (Confente & Kucharska, 2021).

One of the most critical initiatives hospitals implement to promote their brand online is creating content that nourishes their websites with helpful information for each stakeholder (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2020). Hospitals adapt those contents to the information needs of four primary target audiences: healthcare professionals, patients, media companies, and shareholders. Thanks to corporate websites, doctors and nurses enhance their communication relationships with patients and help them improve their health literacy skills (Pekonen et al., 2020). Online websites also allow doctors and nurses to use visual tools, such as videos, photos, and infographics, to explain medical concepts to patients, thereby enhancing their medical outcomes (Ratri et al., 2020). On the other hand, corporate websites help journalists at media companies access high-quality medical information, thereby positively affecting hospitals' public image by serving as credible sources (Chen & Wang, 2021). Finally, hospitals' corporate websites can also serve as sources of credible information for shareholders, which is why some of these organizations integrate an "about us" section on their websites where they share financial, business, and organizational information (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2020). In other words, corporate websites remain the primary communication tool for hospitals seeking to establish meaningful relationships with their stakeholders (Steenbruggen et al., 2021).

When hospitals efficiently manage their corporate websites, they positively influence stakeholders' perceptions, which, in turn, determine the organization's reputation. Brand reputation refers to the network of associations people draw on when engaging with an organization (Triemstra et al., 2018). Companies implement several communication initiatives to influence those networks and accelerate their reputational processes (Zhang et al., 2021). However, companies cannot control everything; every company's decisions and employees' behaviors determine the organization's reputation (Xifra, 2020). For this reason, more and more hospitals are training their employees to analyze the impact of their decisions and behaviors on the organization's reputation (Shieh et al., 2020). In other words, most hospitals consider communication a business skill that all employees should reinforce to protect the company's reputation (Yantian et al., 2022). For this reason, hospitals employ experts in corporate communication who train employees on how to use the organization's websites for reputation purposes (Ren & Baalong, 2021). Some hospitals have even developed online health communities where patients and healthcare professionals share knowledge and experiences (Wu et al., 2019), reinforcing these professionals' scientific credibility and the organization's online reputation (Ren & Baalong, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Building a reputable brand is challenging, as hospitals must interact with many stakeholders: employees, patients, media companies, and shareholders. These branding processes must benefit hospitals' business interests; however, these processes must also fulfill their stakeholders' information and emotional needs. In this context, some hospitals focus their branding efforts on online content tools, such as social media platforms and websites. To better understand how hospitals use online tools to reinforce their brands, we consulted the *world's best hospitals 2024*, an annual ranking published by *Newsweek* and *Statista*. Both

Table 1. Brand indicators

Healthcare professionals: For healthcare professionals	Patients: Patients	Media companies: Newsroom	Shareholders: About us
1. Scientific publications	1. List of diseases and treatments	1. Research led by doctors	1. Company's history
2. Innovation projects with external partners	2. Appointment checklist	2. Scientific events organized by the hospital	2. Brand architecture (mission, vision, values, identity, culture)
3. Continuing education programs	3. Preparing for surgery	3. Outreach projects with external partners	3. Governance and board of trustees
4. Graduate medical education programs	4. Planning to go home	4. Health education initiatives	4. Annual reports
5. Laboratories	5. Requesting medical records	5. Health library	5. Facts and figures
6. Clinical trials	6. Support groups	6. Hospital facts	6. Awards
7. Requesting medical records for patients	7. Patients' experiences	7. Annual reports	7. Rankings
8. Patient transfer system	8. International patients	8. Corporate videos	8. Innovation projects
9. About doctors and researchers	9. Digital tools	9. Newsletter	9. Corporate social responsibility
10. International collaborations	10. Corporate reports	10. Patients' stories	10. Corporate partnerships

companies defined national and global rankings based on previous analyses of 2.400 hospitals from 30 countries. They used four indicators to determine each hospital's position in those rankings:

- (a) recommendations from 85.000 healthcare professionals working in hospitals from 30 countries,
- (b) patient surveys about their experiences in hospitals,
- (c) hospital quality indicators on quality of care, safety, and doctor-patient ratios, and
- (d) patient-reported outcomes measures questionnaires that evaluated patients' views about their quality of life.

Each indicator had a different weight on hospitals' global grade: 45.0%, 16.25%, 35.25%, and 3.50%, respectively. All quantitative results related to hospitals' positions in rankings were validated by a global board of medical experts from Germany, Switzerland, Israel, the United States, and France (Newsweek, 2024).

Based on *Newsweek's* and *Statista's* analysis, we identified the 100 best hospitals in Spain (see [Appendix A](#)). We analyzed how Spain's best hospitals managed their corporate website for branding purposes. Websites remain hospitals' primary corporate communication tool because they enable the sharing of medical information with patients, enhance hospitals' internal processes, and credibly reinforce those organizations' brands (Berg et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2021). For this reason, we focused on websites rather than other online communication platforms, such as mobile apps or social media. We evaluated how each hospital used its website to interact with healthcare professionals, patients, media companies, and shareholders. We focused on these four stakeholders since they are the most important in hospitals' branding processes. Doctors and nurses represent hospitals' scientific credibility and play a crucial role in these organizations' communication activities (Winter et al., 2020). Patients' attitudes and perceptions significantly influence hospitals' branding processes, as they can trigger positive word of mouth about the organization (Simonsmeier et al., 2021). Concerning journalists, they can help hospitals launch public health campaigns that reinforce these organizations' reputations (Civitelli et al., 2020). Finally, shareholders' decisions impact hospitals' business objectives and public image (Bol et al., 2020).

From 13th February to 9th March 2025, we conducted a quantitative analysis to understand better how the 100 best hospitals in Spain used their corporate websites to interact with employees, patients, media companies, and shareholders, thereby promoting their brands. Based on the literature review, we identified 40 brand indicators that hospitals should consider when implementing online content strategies for branding purposes. Then, we classified those 40 indicators into four categories, each referring to one of the four stakeholders we considered in this analysis: healthcare professionals, patients, media companies, and shareholders. Finally, we matched each category with a particular section on hospitals' websites:

- (a) *healthcare professionals* ("for healthcare professionals" section),
- (b) *patients* ("patients" section),
- (c) *media companies* ("newsroom" section), and
- (d) *shareholders* ("about us" section)—see [Table 1](#).

Table 2. Best hospitals: Healthcare professionals

Hospital	Number of indicators respected
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu	9
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona-Pediatrics	
Hospital Universitario HM Montepíncipe	7
Hospital HM Nou Delfos	
Clínica Universidad de Navarra	6
Hospital Vithas Xanit Internacional	
Hospital Son Llàtzer	

During the quantitative analysis, we discovered that some hospitals had these sections, but they were named differently: for example, “our doctors” instead of “for healthcare professionals.” We included all those sections in our analysis. Concerning dated information (scientific publications and press releases), we focused on those published in the two previous years. As to non-dated information (list of treatments and brand architecture elements), we included all elements available on the websites. We only considered hospitals’ official websites. Finally, we used a binary system to determine whether these organizations met each indicator. We resorted to a binary system because our goal was not to analyze in depth each hospital’s website content, but rather to determine whether hospitals were developing their websites in line with branding and corporate communication logics.

RESULTS

Most hospitals in Spain used corporate websites to strengthen relationships with stakeholders and promote their brands. Indeed, 80 out of 100 hospitals considered in this analysis had a corporate website. However, most did not comply with the 40 brand indicators, which means that these organizations must professionalize their online content strategies. We presented our results grouped into five main categories:

- (a) healthcare professionals,
- (b) patients,
- (c) media companies,
- (d) shareholders, and
- (e) global results.

Healthcare Professionals

Our results proved that 62 hospitals had a section for doctors and nurses named “for healthcare professionals.” In that section, most hospitals shared information about their laboratories (47), continuing education programs for healthcare professionals (44), doctors’ and nurses’ professional backgrounds (37), and their leading scientific publications (31). Nevertheless, most hospitals did not comply with the six other criteria considered in that section: innovation projects led by the hospital in collaboration with external partners (20), hospital’s clinical trials (20), graduate medical education programs proposed to doctors and nurses working in the organization (15), online system to request medical records about patients (11), hospital’s international collaborations with other healthcare institutions (9) and clear information about the hospital’s transfer patient system (0). On average, hospitals complied with 3,62 criteria out of the ten applicable. The only hospitals that met all nine criteria were *Hospital de Sant Joan de Deu* and *Hospital de Sant Joan de Deu Barcelona-Pediatrics* (see [Table 2](#)).¹

Patients

69 hospitals had a “patients” section where they displayed valuable information for this stakeholder: a list of diseases and treatments (66), appointment checklist (29), digital tools (26), corporate reports (23), information for international patients (14), support groups in the hospital (11), information about the procedures to go home (9), patients’ experiences (8), information about how to prepare for surgery (7), and online forms to request medical records (1). On the other hand, 62,32% of hospitals having this section

¹ Both hospitals used the same website.

Table 3. Best hospitals: Newsroom

Hospital	Number of indicators respected
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu	10
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona–Pediatrics	
Clínica Universidad de Navarra	8
Hospital Universitario La Moraleja	
Hospital Universitario HM Montepíncipe	7
Hospital Universitario HM Madrid	
Hospital Universitario Rey Juan Carlos	
Hospital HM Nou Delfos	

Table 4. Best hospitals: About us section

Hospital	Number of indicators respected
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu	10
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona–Pediatrics	
Clínic Barcelona	8
Hospital Universitari Vall d'Hebron	
Clínica Universidad de Navarra	
Hospital Universitari de Bellvitge	
Hospital Universitario La Moraleja	7
Hospital Universitario Ramón y Cajal	
Hospital Universitario del Vinalopó	
Hospital HM Nou Delfos	
Hospital de Barcelona	

respected between 1 and 3 criteria out of the ten applicable. The best hospitals in this category were *Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu*, *Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona–Pediatrics* (9 indicators); *Hospital Germans Trias i Pujol* (6 indicators); *Clínic Barcelona*, *Clínica Universidad de Navarra*, *Hospital Universitario Río Hortega de Valladolid*, *Hospital Universitario HM Madrid*, *Hospital Universitario Rey Juan Carlos*, *Hospital Universitario del Vinalopó* and *Hospital Sant Rafael* (5 indicators).

Media Companies

According to our results, 75 hospitals had a newsroom. Most hospitals used that section to share press releases about their doctors' and nurses' research projects (68), the hospital's scientific events (66), the outreach projects that the organization had implemented in collaboration with external partners (50), and the health education initiatives addressed to patients (44). However, most hospitals did not comply with the other criteria considered in that section: corporate videos about the hospital and its services (34), facts about the organization (20), health library (14), annual reports (10), newsletters for journalists (9), and patients' stories (3). On average, hospitals respected 4,24 criteria out of the ten applicable. The best hospitals in that category were *Hospital de Sant Joan de Deu* and *Hospital de Sant Joan de Deu Barcelona-Pediatrics* (see [Table 3](#)).

Shareholders

79 hospitals had an “about us” section where they shared information addressed to shareholders: facts and figures about the organization (72), the company's brand architecture -mission, vision, values, identity, culture- (46) and its history and main milestones (45). However, most hospitals did not respect the other brand indicators: annual reports (35), information about the company's governance and board of trustees (27), awards (27), corporate social responsibility initiatives (21), hospital's innovation projects (19), corporate partnerships (12), and rankings (11). On the other hand, 48,1% of hospitals having a newsroom respected between 3 and 5 criteria out of 10 applicable. The only hospitals that complied with the ten criteria were *Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu* and *Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona–Pediatrics* (see [Table 4](#)).

Global Results

Most Spanish hospitals used their websites to promote their brands; however, few implemented professional online content strategies. Indeed, on average, hospitals with a website respected 13.15 of 40 applicable indicators. Our global results revealed that the best hospitals in Spain were *Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu* and *Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona–Pediatrics* (see [Table 5](#)).

Table 5. Best hospitals: Global results

Hospital	Number of indicators respected
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu	38
Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona–Pediatrics	
Clínica Universidad de Navarra	27
Clínic Barcelona	23
Hospital Universitari de Bellvitge	
Hospital Universitari Vall d'Hebron	22
Hospital Universitario HM Madrid	
Hospital Universitario La Moraleja	
Hospital HM Nou Delfos	21
Hospital Son Llàtzer	

DISCUSSION

Our results showed that 80% of Spanish hospitals had a corporate website, indicating that they considered this platform a communication tool. However, on average, they complied with only 13.15 of the 40 applicable indicators. Many reasons lead hospitals to disregard corporate communication. First, hospitals must respect strict legal and ethical frameworks that highly limit their corporate communication initiatives. Second, healthcare communication remains a secondary area in most Spanish hospitals, where doctors, nurses, and management experts make decisions without considering communication criteria. And third, most hospitals, especially the public ones, lack financial support to establish professional in-house communication departments. Regardless of each hospital's particular situation, our results showed that these organizations must urgently improve their online communication initiatives. In other words, they must learn to manage their websites as strategic communication tools to build their brands more professionally.

Healthcare professionals are essential in developing hospitals' new technological environments, as they integrate these tools into their daily practices (Valizadeh & Ghasemi, 2020). Besides, they help patients understand the role of technology in treatment and disease (Lv & Qiao, 2020) and how to use different technological platforms to find high-quality medical information (Sayantan et al., 2020). In other words, doctors and nurses are essential in reinforcing hospitals' scientific credibility and patients' empowerment (Shafiee et al., 2022). However, our results in the "for healthcare professionals" section showed that most Spanish hospitals did not use their websites to promote healthcare professionals' scientific credibility. Indeed, only 20 hospitals described the innovation projects their doctors and nurses had implemented in collaboration with external partners. The same applied to clinical trials, an essential area for proving healthcare professionals' scientific credibility: only 20 hospitals shared content on this topic. Finally, only 9 hospitals described the international collaboration their healthcare professionals had established with institutions from other countries. This fact is consistent with a deep issue affecting Spanish hospitals: managers and medical directors running these organizations do not consider healthcare professionals as brand ambassadors but as technicians who must focus their time and effort on their respective medical departments. This unprofessional management approach negatively influences hospitals' and healthcare professionals' reputation.

Patients worldwide are wary of medical information shared by technology companies (Véliz, 2021), which is why hospitals should improve their health education initiatives and become patients' preferred sources of medical information (Chiruvella & Guddati, 2021). Thanks to health education, hospitals can also promote shared decision-making processes among doctors and patients, improving patients' satisfaction with the organization (Lenert & McSwain, 2020). When hospitals follow this professional logic, they can integrate patients into the organization's collective branding processes (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2021). Nevertheless, our results revealed that, on average, 62,32% of Spanish hospitals respected only 1-3 of 10 applicable criteria in the "patients" section, indicating that these organizations did not consider their websites a strategic communication tool to reinforce their relationships with patients. Even though most hospitals displayed lists of diseases and treatments (66), they did not share essential information for patients, such as support groups (11), patients' experiences (8), or practical information about surgical processes (7). Finally, only 26 hospitals shared information about digital tools patients could use before, during, and after their hospital stay, which negatively affected their empowerment and health literacy. These facts prove that most

Spanish hospitals must urgently revisit their online communication strategies to serve patients better. Unfortunately, many hospitals in Spain, especially the public ones, depend on regional and national public health authorities, whose budgets are limited, which is why they focus their investments on health priorities (clinical assistance, internal functioning) rather than online communication platforms for patients.

Citizens are increasingly asking companies to share meaningful content that enhances their lives; otherwise, citizens will never consider companies as genuine brands (Hart & Phau, 2022). This situation also affects hospitals: these organizations must improve the content they share with stakeholders and include more cultural and emotional elements (Adebesin & Mwalugha, 2020). This is especially important on online platforms, such as websites and social media, since both have become sources of information for citizens (Rasmus, 2021). When hospitals share meaningful content on those platforms and meet all their stakeholders' information needs, they improve the organization's brand reputation (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2020). Unfortunately, our results showed that most Spanish hospitals did not make sufficient efforts to meet the information needs of stakeholders, such as media companies and shareholders. Even though most hospitals had a newsroom for journalists (75) and an "about us" section for shareholders (79), most did not comply with the brand indicators. For instance, only a few hospitals had a health library (14), shared annual reports with journalists (10), or proposed subscribing to the hospital's official newsletter (9). On the other hand, most hospitals did not display basic information to evaluate the organizations' performance: corporate social responsibility initiatives (21), innovation updates (19), and corporate partnerships with other institutions (12). These facts prove that most hospitals in Spain do not invest enough to implement professional in-house corporate communication departments. Besides, most of them do not even employ health communication experts. In that country, the number of universities offering health communication diplomas is minimal, which is why hospitals struggle to find qualified employees who can merge branding, communication, and public health to implement creative initiatives that help the organization become a meaningful brand.

This paper highlighted the importance of using corporate websites as a strategic communication tool to enhance hospitals' branding efforts. Despite the qualitative and quantitative findings, three limitations affected this research. First, we did not analyze these organizations' communication departments—internal structure, annual plans, budgets—and we only considered hospitals' websites in a binary way—presence or absence of each indicator—without conducting deeper content analysis. Second, we did not evaluate how these organizations used mobile apps and social media platforms to reinforce their online branding initiatives. Third, we did not find similar papers published in other countries, so we could not compare our results with those from hospitals in different parts of the world. Researchers interested in this area should focus their efforts on three main topics that will determine these organizations' online communication strategies in the coming years: the role of healthcare professionals as brand ambassadors, the integration of artificial intelligence into the hospital's online communication strategies, and the role of patients' health literacy skills in hospitals' branding processes.

CONCLUSION

Building a reputable brand is a challenge for hospitals, as they must interact with different stakeholders, develop a content strategy, integrate multiple communication tools, comply with strict legal frameworks, and adhere to various ethical standards. Despite these challenges, hospitals continue to invest in branding efforts as the healthcare industry becomes increasingly complex, driven by the emergence of private hospital groups, patients' evolving needs, doctors' new professional backgrounds, and advances in medical technology. In this framework, many hospitals use websites to build their brands.

This paper aimed to understand how Spanish hospitals utilized their websites to implement content strategies to promote their brands. After analyzing this area quantitatively and qualitatively, we found three main conclusions. First, most Spanish hospitals had sections on their websites for their main stakeholders (healthcare professionals—62, patients—69, media companies—75, and shareholders—79); however, the content strategies they implemented for each of them did not help fulfil their information needs. Indeed, most hospitals did not comply with the brand indicators considered in each section: healthcare professionals—3.62 out of 10 on average; patients—2.82 out of 10; media companies—4.24 out of 10; and shareholders—3.98 out of 10. Second, most Spanish hospitals used their websites to share official information—annual reports, figures,

and lists of diseases—but did not include enough information from their stakeholders, such as patients' stories or details about support groups. This fact shows that most Spanish hospitals were not effectively integrating their stakeholders into their branding processes. Third, most Spanish hospitals adopted an excessive, formal communication approach focused on facts and legal documents rather than an emotional approach that considers stakeholders' cultural, social, and emotional needs. This fact explains why most hospitals struggle to engage stakeholders and establish long-term relationships with them.

Hospitals' managers in Spain should urgently address this area and implement three initiatives to build more credible brands. First, they must develop more efficient in-house communication departments where experts in public relations, branding, public health, and business define and execute corporate communication plans, branding content strategies, and annual content plans consistent with the organization's requirements and its stakeholders' rational and emotional needs. Second, hospitals' branding strategies must not only address business areas (reputation, economic benefits, employees' sense of belonging), but also long-term issues, such as the hospital's social legacy and its influence on people's quality of life: otherwise, hospitals' branding strategies will remain empty and will never impact stakeholders' perceptions. Third, hospitals must implement professional training sessions to help their healthcare professionals become active participants in the organization's online initiatives, as those employees represent the company's scientific credibility.

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Ethics declaration: The authors declared that all ethical requirements related to online content analysis about hospitals' websites were respected. The authors further declared that the study did not involve any patients and did not require approval from an ethics committee.

AI statement: The authors declared they did not use any artificial intelligence-based tool to develop any element of this paper.

Declaration of interest: The authors declared no competing interest.

Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the authors on request.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF HOSPITALS

1. Hospital Universitario La Paz
2. Hospital Universitario 12 de Octubre
3. Clínic Barcelona
4. Hospital Universitari Vall d'Hebron
5. Hospital General Universitario Gregorio Marañón
6. Clínica Universidad de Navarra
7. Hospital Universitario Ramón y Cajal
8. Hospital Universitari i Politècnic La Fe
9. Hospital Clínico San Carlos
10. Hospital Universitario Virgen del Rocío
11. Hospital Universitario Fundación Jiménez Díaz
12. Hospital Universitario Puerta de Hierro
13. Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau
14. Hospital Universitario Marqués de Valdecilla
15. Hospital Universitario Madrid Sanchinarro
16. Hospital Ruber Internacional
17. Centro Médico Teknon
18. Hospital Quirónsalud Barcelona
19. Hospital Universitario Virgen de las Nieves
20. Hospital Universitario Virgen Macarena
21. Hospital Universitario Reina Sofía
22. Hospital Universitari de Bellvitge
23. Hospital Universitario de a Coruña
24. Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valencia
25. Hospital Universitario Quirónsalud Madrid
26. Hospital Universitario la Zarzuela
27. Hospital Universitari Quirón Dexeus
28. Hospital Universitario Miguel Servet
29. Hospital Universitario Dr. Peset
30. Hospital Universitario Central de Asturias
31. Hospital Universitario de la Princesa
32. Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valladolid
33. Hospital Quirónsalud Málaga
34. Complejo Asistencial Universitario de Salamanca
35. Hospital Universitario Regional de Málaga
36. Hospital Universitario Infanta Leonor
37. Hospital Universitari Sagrat Cor
38. Hospital Clínico Universitario Virgen de la Arrixaca
39. Hospital Clínico Universitario de Santiago
40. Hospital HLA Universitario Moncloa
41. Hospital Universitario Río Hortega de Valladolid
42. Hospital Universitario HM Montepríncipe
43. Hospital Universitario Galdakao-Usansolo
44. Hospital de Barcelona
45. Hospital General Universitario Reina Sofía
46. Hospital Universitarios San Roque
47. Hospital Quirónsalud Sagrado Corazón
48. Hospital General Universitario de Ciudad Real
49. Hospital Vithas Valencia 9 de Octubre
50. Hospital Germans Trias i Pujol
51. Consorcio Hospital General Universitario de Valencia
52. Hospital del Mar
53. Hospital Universitario de Móstoles
54. Hospital Universitario de Cruces

55. Hospital Universitario HM Madrid
56. Hospital Universitario Basurto
57. Hospital Universitario Donostia
58. Hospital Universitario Nuestra Señora de Candelaria
59. Hospital General Universitario de Alicante
60. Hospital Universitario Rey Juan Carlos
61. Hospital General Universitario Morales Meseguer
62. Hospital Universitario Torrecárdenas
63. Complejo Hospitalario Universitario de Vigo
64. Hospital Universitario Virgen de la Victoria
65. Complejo Hospitalario Universitario de Badajoz
66. Hospital Costa del Sol
67. Hospital Clínico Universitario Lozano Blesa
68. Hospital Universitario Fundación Alcorcón
69. Hospital Universitario Virgen de Valme
70. Hospital Universitario Clínico San Cecilio
71. Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu
72. Hospital Universitario de Araba
73. Complejo Asistencial Universitario de León
74. Hospital General Universitario Santa Lucía
75. Complejo Hospitalario Universitario de Cáceres
76. Complejo Hospitalario Universitario de Albacete
77. Clínica Sagrada Família
78. Hospital Universitario de Getafe
79. Hospital San Pedro
80. Hospital Universitario del Vinalopó
81. Hospital Universitario Severo Ochoa
82. Hospital Universitario de Gran Canaria Doctor Negrín
83. Hospital Universitari de Girona Doctor Josep Trueta
84. Hospital Universitario La Moraleja
85. Hospital Universitario Puerta del Mar
86. Hospital Vithas Xanit Internacional
87. Complejo Hospitalario Universitario de Ferrol
88. Hospital HM Nou Delfos
89. Hospital de Sabadell
90. Hospital Universitario de Jaén
91. Hospital Universitario San Juan de Alicante
92. Hospital Central de la Defensa Gómez Ulla
93. Clínica Nostra Senyora del Remei
94. HCB Benidorm
95. Complexo Hospitalario Universitario de Ourense
96. Hospital Sant Rafael
97. Hospital Royo Villanova
98. Complejo Asistencial de Ávila
99. Hospital Son Llàtzer
100. Hospital de Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona–Pediatrics

