

Building Credible Brands through Corporate Websites: A Quantitative Analysis of France's Best Hospitals

La Construcción de Marcas Creíbles a través de las Páginas Web Corporativas: un Análisis Cuantitativo sobre los Mejores Hospitales de Francia

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Abstract

Introduction: Hospitals manage their websites to strengthen their relationships with stakeholders and collectively build their brand. **Objective:** This paper aims to analyze how French hospitals use their websites to share content that reinforces relationships with stakeholders and promotes their brands. **Methodology:** We conducted a literature review of hospitals' corporate communication initiatives, branding efforts, and online branding initiatives. Then, we defined 40 brand indicators to quantitatively analyze how France's 100 best hospitals managed their corporate websites to interact with healthcare professionals, patients, media companies, and shareholders. **Results:** Our results showed that most hospitals had sections for healthcare professionals (61, 62%), patients (96, 97%), media companies (98, 99%), and shareholders (100%); however, they only respected, on average, 12.39 brand indicators out of 40 applicable. **Conclusion:** We concluded that most French hospitals used their websites to share administrative information, rather than to promote their healthcare professionals' brand value or establish an emotional connection with patients.

Keywords: Hospitals; Corporate communication; Brand; Reputation; Website.

Resumen

Introducción: Los hospitales usan sus páginas web para reforzar sus relaciones con los grupos de interés y construir la marca colectivamente con ellos. **Objetivo:** Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar cómo utilizan los hospitales franceses sus páginas web para compartir contenidos que refuercen las relaciones con sus grupos de interés y así promover sus marcas. **Metodología:** Para ello, realizamos una revisión de la literatura sobre las iniciativas de comunicación corporativa, los esfuerzos de marca y las iniciativas de *branding* online de los hospitales. Posteriormente, definimos 40 indicadores de marca para analizar cuantitativamente cómo los 100 mejores hospitales de Francia usan sus páginas web para interactuar con los profesionales sanitarios, los pacientes, los medios de comunicación y los accionistas. **Resultados:** Nuestros resultados demostraron que la mayoría de los hospitales tenían una sección para profesionales sanitarios (61,62%), pacientes (96,97%), medios de comunicación (98,99%) y accionistas (100%); sin embargo, sólo respetaban, de media, 12,39 indicadores de marca de los 40 existentes. **Conclusión:** Concluimos que la mayoría de los hospitales franceses utilizaban sus páginas web para compartir información administrativa, pero no para promover el valor de marca de sus profesionales sanitarios ni para establecer una conexión emocional con los pacientes.

Palabras clave: Hospitales; Comunicación corporativa; Marca; Reputación; Página web

Introduction

French hospitals implement corporate communication initiatives to promote their brands and strengthen their relationships with key stakeholders, including employees, patients, media companies, shareholders, and governments. These organizations manage media relations to improve their public image, organize internal events to enhance employee relationships, and launch health education campaigns to promote their reputation. In recent years, French hospitals have focused their corporate communication efforts on websites, social media platforms, and mobile applications. Thanks to these online tools, hospitals can establish more dynamic relationships with stakeholders and collectively build their brand. However, using websites, social media, and mobile applications also presents a challenge, as hospitals must adhere to strict legal frameworks, employ new languages, and continually monitor their stakeholders' perceptions. This means that hospital communication department employees must upgrade their skills in digital branding and revamp the organization's corporate communication strategies. These challenges significantly affect hospitals that use social media platforms and mobile applications, as they must invest vast amounts of time, money, and human resources, which is sometimes not feasible for them. For this reason, many hospitals focus their online communication efforts on their corporate websites.

This paper examines how France's 100 best hospitals manage their corporate websites to share content with stakeholders and collectively build their brand

This paper examines how France's 100 best hospitals manage their corporate websites to share content with stakeholders and collectively build their brand. In other words, this paper's central research question is: What are the primary corporate content elements that French hospitals share on their websites to reinforce relationships with stakeholders and promote their brands? To answer this question, we conducted a literature review about hospitals' corporate communication initiatives, branding efforts, and online initiatives. Then, we resorted to the World's Best Hospitals 2024, published by Newsweek and Statista, to identify the 100 best hospitals in France. Subsequently, we defined 40 brand indicators and quantitatively analyzed how the 100 best hospitals in that country used their corporate websites to interact with their primary stakeholders: healthcare professionals, patients, media companies, and shareholders. Finally, based on our quantitative results, we discussed the main scientific implications of this research and proposed three managerial recommendations to help French hospitals manage their websites more efficiently as corporate communication tools.

Hospitals' Online Branding Strategies

Hospitals' Communication Initiatives

Health communication experts analyze the role of communication in hospitals by implementing a multidisciplinary approach that includes medicine, nursing, public health, social sciences, and economics (Kreps, 2020). Their primary responsibility is to launch communication campaigns that enhance hospitals' public image and improve their stakeholders' experiences (Tilkin et al., 2019). These campaigns prioritize human values, such as knowledge, emotional support, or empathy, to efficiently impact stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes (Shafiee, Ansari & Mahjob, 2022). This human approach helps hospitals improve stakeholders' lives from a medical, cultural, social, and emotional perspective (Li & Xu, 2020). This human approach must also be consistent with ethical standards and legal frameworks; this way, hospitals can reinforce their public image and reputation (Merminod & Benaroyo, 2021; Medina Aguerrebere, González Pacanowski, Medina, 2021).

Health communication experts implement various communication activities, including interpersonal communication campaigns that foster relationships among doctors, nurses, and patients (Hammoud, Amer, Lohner, & Kocsis, 2020). These activities are essential for educating patients on health-related issues, strengthening their knowledge of prevention, and empowering them as active participants in the healthcare system (Tilkin et al., 2019). Patient empowerment has become a crucial asset: for this reason, health communication experts integrate this aspect into each level of care production and train healthcare professionals in this area (Pekonen, Eloranta, Stolt, Virolainen & Leino-Kilpi, 2020). These training programs help doctors and nurses adjust their behavior to patients' emotional, cultural, and social needs (Affinito, Fontanella, Montano & Brucato, 2022). When healthcare professionals

communicate with patients more humanely, they improve patients' satisfaction with the hospital's system (Nichols, Dababnah, Berger, Long, & Sacco, 2021) and facilitate the establishment of collaborative decision-making processes among doctors, nurses, and patients (Parker, Ryan, Young, & Hill, 2021).

Hospitals launch corporate communication initiatives to build reputable brands that influence their stakeholders' perceptions and reinforce the organization's strategic positioning in the healthcare market (Medina Aguerrebere et al., 2021). To efficiently achieve this goal, health communication experts evaluate their stakeholders' behaviors and needs, and based on that, define communication strategies, including goals, target audiences, and brand positioning (Odoom, Narteh, & Odoom, 2019). Thanks to research insights, hospitals can improve the efficiency of their communication strategies and establish more meaningful relationships with stakeholders (Lithopoulos, Evans, Faulkner, & Rhodes, 2021), which positively influences the organization's corporate credibility (Reitsamer & Brunner, 2021). On the other hand, these communication initiatives must be consistent with the hospital's brand architecture, including its mission, vision, values, identity, and culture; otherwise, these initiatives will not reinforce the brand's uniqueness (Hart & Phau, 2022; Ren & Ma, 2021). Ultimately, these initiatives must prioritize long-term objectives and involve all stakeholders, enabling hospitals to collectively build their brands (Govers, 2020).

Hospitals' Branding Efforts

Health communication experts' primary responsibility is building reputable brands that help hospitals achieve their business goals (Medina Aguerrebere, González Pacanowski, Medina, 2020). To achieve this, they consider both tangible aspects, such as research projects, business goals, and economic results, and intangible elements, including employees' interpersonal communication skills and patients' perceptions of the hospital (Odoom et al., 2019). Tangible and intangible elements must be consistent with the hospital's identity; otherwise, these branding efforts will not effectively promote the hospital's reputation (Singla & Sharma, 2021). On the other hand, these branding efforts must respect the hospital's original roots (history, founders' vision) so that stakeholders perceive the organization as an authentic brand (Rindell & Santos, 2021). Finally, hospitals' branding campaigns must comply with ethical standards (Sander, Föhl, Walter & Demmer, 2021) and prioritize meaningful goals, such as transforming the healthcare industry or reinforcing patients' rights (Bol, Smit, Mia, 2020).

When hospitals implement branding campaigns, they consider business and cultural aspects— language, history, and social behaviors —to influence stakeholders' perceptions more efficiently (Tan, Soneji, Choi, & Moran, 2020). Thanks to this approach, health communication experts develop more persuasive messages that fulfill stakeholders' information needs and reinforce hospitals' public image (Jenkins, Ilicic, Molenaar, Chin & McCaffrey, 2020). To efficiently implement this approach, some hospitals resort to corporate social responsibility, associating the hospital brand with social aspects such as employees' working conditions, the common good, or respect for the environment (Correa et al., 2021). Some hospitals implement corporate social responsibility initiatives in the countries where they develop their business; however, other hospitals develop this area in foreign countries where the local population faces humanitarian tragedies (Mheidly & Fares, 2020). Regardless of each hospital's strategies in this area, corporate social responsibility helps them reinforce their moral capital and social influence, which is essential to building a reputable brand (Lithopoulos et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021).

Health communication experts implement branding campaigns to demonstrate, with facts, that hospitals improve their stakeholders' quality of life; nevertheless, they must also develop an emotional connection with every stakeholder (De Las Heras, Rando, Jambrino, & Paniagua, 2020). This emotional attachment enables hospitals to transform their communication strategies and establish more meaningful relationships with stakeholders, particularly patients and employees (Razmus, 2021). Additionally, it helps them to innovate and implement unique communication initiatives that allow stakeholders to learn about health education, prevention, and medical technologies (Tsai, Lun, Carcioppolo, & Chuan, 2021; Hart & Phau, 2022). In other words, prioritizing an emotional approach is crucial for building a more dynamic brand that enables hospitals to transform their relationships with stakeholders from a medical, social, and cultural perspective (Rahman, Langner, Temme, 2021).

Hospitals' Online Branding Activities

The development of the Internet, social media platforms, and mobile applications presents a challenge for hospitals, as stakeholders now have access to vast amounts of information, requiring health professionals to adjust their behaviors (Rudd, 2022). To overcome this challenge and use this technology efficiently, some hospitals adapt their communication strategies and develop online content tailored to stakeholders' information and emotional needs (Lithopoulos et al., 2021). This content enables hospitals to establish long-term relationships with stakeholders and reinforces the scientific credibility of their healthcare professionals (Barredo, Molina, Medranda, & Rodríguez, 2021). On the other hand, hospitals must also use their websites and social media platforms to establish an emotional relationship with stakeholders (Rahman et al., 2021). This emotional approach is crucial in helping these organizations become iconic brands that drive social change (Zhang, Yan, Wang, & Chen, 2021) and add value to people's lives (Khosravizadeh et al., 2021).

Health communication experts integrate cultural elements into the hospital's branding initiatives (history, cultural identity, and social engagements) to make the brand more unique (Zhao et al., 2021). Promoting cultural elements is essential to influence stakeholders' attitudes and help them become active players in the hospitals' online branding initiatives (Tan et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021). However, achieving this goal is challenging. For this reason, hospitals should evaluate their stakeholders' cultural perceptions and implement online branding efforts that are consistent with the organization's brand architecture and its stakeholders' cultural backgrounds (Adebesin & Mwalugha, 2020). When hospitals adopt this professional approach, they become credible brands that integrate stakeholders into their collective branding processes and lead global changes that transform society (Tsai et al., 2021; Bian & Haque, 2020).

Health communication experts manage websites, social media, and mobile applications to reinforce hospitals' brands and reputations (Medina Aguerreberere et al., 2020). The concept of reputation refers to indivisible networks of associations that stakeholders use whenever they engage with companies (Govers, 2020). Health communication experts implement online branding campaigns to influence these networks; however, these associations also include aspects, such as employees' and patients' attitudes, that hospitals cannot control (Xifra, 2020). For this reason, health communication experts must innovate and implement unique initiatives that efficiently influence stakeholders from an emotional, cultural, and social perspective (Bian & Haque, 2020). When hospitals utilize online platforms to communicate creatively, they establish more meaningful relationships with stakeholders (Zhao et al., 2021), mitigate reputational risks (Confente & Kucharska, 2021), and expedite collective branding processes with stakeholders that reinforce the organization's brand reputation (Triemstra, Poepelman, Arora, 2018).

Methodology

French hospitals utilize corporate websites, social media platforms, and mobile applications to establish distinct brands and enhance stakeholder relationships. Among all online platforms available, the corporate website remains the most important one since hospitals can use it to share scientific, educational, and corporate information in several formats (video, text, images). To understand how the best hospitals in France manage their websites to promote their brands, we consulted the World's Best Hospitals 2024, an official ranking published yearly by Newsweek and Statista to evaluate the best hospitals in various countries. They considered four criteria to analyze 2,400 hospitals from 30 countries: a) recommendations from 85,000 healthcare professionals; b) patient surveys about hospitals; c) hospital quality indicators on doctor-patient ratios, quality of care, and safety standards; and d) patient-reported outcomes measures questionnaires that evaluated patients' perceptions about quality of life. Each criterion represented a different weight in the hospital's global rating and its consequent position in the ranking: 45%, 16.25%, 35.25%, and 3.5%, respectively. Once every hospital received a grade, a Global Board of Medical Experts from several countries (France, Germany, and the United States) validated the results and their position in the ranking (Newsweek, 2024).

Thanks to Newsweek's and Statista's rankings, we analyzed how the 100 best hospitals in France managed their websites to interact with four primary stakeholders: healthcare professionals, patients, media companies, and shareholders (see Appendix 1). We focused on these stakeholders since they are the most important ones to implement collective branding processes: healthcare professionals represent the hospital's scientific credibility (Driever, Stiggelbout, Brand, 2020), patients are brand ambassadors who influence other stakeholders' attitudes

and perceptions (Bakken, 2021), media companies contribute to reinforce the hospital's social impact (Chou, 2021), and shareholders make business decisions that affect the hospital's communication initiatives (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020).

From December 9, 2024, to January 18, 2025, we quantitatively analyzed how the best hospitals in France utilized their websites for branding purposes. Thanks to our literature review and an initial screening of hospitals' websites, we identified 40 brand indicators that these institutions should adhere to to build reputable brands efficiently. Then, we classified those indicators into four categories, each referring to one of the previously mentioned stakeholders: a) healthcare professionals, b) patients, c) media companies, and d) shareholders. Afterward, 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-. Finally, we resorted to a binary system to analyze whether hospitals respected the 40 brand indicators. They sometimes named the four website sections differently: for instance, "Communication" rather than "Newsroom." In those cases, we included all these sections. Concerning dated information (scientific publications, corporate reports), we only evaluated those published in the two previous years.

Table 1. Brand Indicators

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

Source: Authors' elaboration

Results

French hospitals use corporate websites to strengthen their relationships with employees, patients, media companies, and shareholders. Our quantitative results revealed that 99% of them managed their corporate websites to share content with their stakeholders. However, many hospitals did not use these platforms efficiently to implement collective branding processes. To better understand this situation, 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. According to our results, 61,2% of French hospitals had a “for healthcare professionals” section. However, most of them used this section to share basic information about laboratories (91.8%), clinical trials (49.18%), continuing education programs (42.62%), and doctors’ and nurses’ scientific publications (40.98%). In other words, only a few hospitals complied with the other indicators considered in this section: an online system to allow doctors to request patients’ medical records (29,51%), information about the hospital’s innovation projects established in collaboration with external partners (27,87%), list of graduate medical education programs for doctors and nurses (26,23%), information about the hospital’s international partnerships with other healthcare organizations (13,11%), facts about doctors’ and researchers’ professional backgrounds (9,84%), and an online system to transfer patients (1,64%). On average, hospitals respected 3,33 out of 10 indicators applicable in this section. As shown in Table 2, the best hospital was CHU Saint-Étienne - Hôpital Bellevue.

Table 2. Healthcare Professionals

Hospital	Number of indicators respected
CHU Saint-Étienne - Hôpital Bellevue	8
CHI Créteil	7
CHU Rouen Normandie - Hôpital Charles-Nicolle	
CHRU - Hôpital Bretonneau	6
CHU Lille - Hôpital Claude-Huriez*	5
CHU Lille - Hôpital Salengro*	
Hôpital Paris Saint-Joseph	
Hôpital Saint-Joseph	
CHU Montpellier - Hôpital Lapeyronie	
Centre Hospitalier Toulon - Hôpital Sainte Musse	
Hôpital Foch	
Centre Hospitalier Saint Joseph et Saint Luc	

*Both hospitals used the same website

Patients. According to our quantitative analysis, 96,97% of French hospitals had a “patients” section in which they displayed several lists of diseases and treatments (95,83%), appointment checklists for patients (62,5%), digital tools that patients could use to interact with the hospital -online portals, mobile applications- (60,42%), online systems to request medical records (45,83%), and practical information to help patients planning to back home (44,79%). Nevertheless, only a few hospitals respected the other indicators: corporate reports about the organization (28,13%), information to help patients prepare for surgery (25%), practical information addressed to international patients (16,67%), patients’ opinions about their experiences in the hospital (9,38%) and a list of support groups for patients suffering from similar diseases (8,33%). On average, hospitals complied with 3,97 indicators out of 10 applicable. The best hospitals in this category were CHU Lille-Hôpital Claude-Huriez, CHU Lille-Hôpital Salengro¹; CHU Bordeaux-Groupe Hospitalier Pellegrin, CHU Bordeaux-Hôpital Saint-André²; Hospices Civils de Lyon-Hôpital Lyon Sud, Hospices Civils de Lyon-Hôpital Louis Pradel, Hospices Civils de Lyon-Hôpital Edouard Herriot, Hospices Civils de Lyon-Hôpital de la Croix-Rousse and Hospices Civils de Lyon-Hôpital Renée Sabran³.

Media companies. 98,99% of hospitals in France had a newsroom in which they shared information with external media companies: research led by the organization’s healthcare professionals (67,35%), scientific events organized by the hospital (59,18%), outreach projects that the hospital had launched in collaboration with external partners (43,88%), health education initiatives addressed to patients (37,76%), annual reports about the hospital (26,53%), facts and figures about the organization (25,51%), corporate videos to promote the hospital (22,45%), health libraries to describe diseases and treatments (2,04%), and patients’ stories about their experience at the hospital (1,02%). Our data revealed that no hospital had a newsletter addressed to external journalists. On the other hand, 60,20% of hospitals respected between 2 and 3 indicators out of 10 applicable in this section. As shown in Table 3, the best hospitals were Hôpital Saint-Joseph and CHU Rouen Normandie - Hôpital Charles-Nicolle.

Table 3. Media Companies

Hospital	Number of indicators respected
Hôpital Saint-Joseph	7
CHU Rouen Normandie - Hôpital Charles-Nicolle	
Hôpital Paris Saint-Joseph	6
Centre Hospitalier de Bligny	
Clinique Internationale Parc Monceau	
CHU Bordeaux - Groupe Hospitalier Pellegrin*	5
Hôpital Saint-André*	
CHU Montpellier - Hôpital Lapeyronie	
Hôpital Prive Cannes Oxford	
Clinique Saint-George	
AP-HP - Hôpital Armand-Trousseau	

*Both hospitals used the same website

¹ Both hospitals used the same website.

² Both hospitals used the same website.

³ All hospitals used the same website.

Shareholders. All hospitals had an “about us” section where they published information addressed to shareholders. Most hospitals shared facts and figures (91%), annual reports (55%), and main historical milestones (50%). However, only a few hospitals complied with the other indicators: information about the hospital’s governance and board of trustees (37,37%), description of the organization’s brand architecture -mission, vision, values, identity, culture- (36,36%), information about the hospital’s innovation projects (26,26%), awards received by the organization (25,25%), lists of the hospital’s corporate social responsibility initiatives (23,23%), list of corporate partnerships established with other companies (12,12%) and hospital’s position in national and international rankings (8,08%). On the other hand, 40,40% of hospitals respected between 1 and 2 indicators. The best organizations in this category were Hôpital Américain, CHRU - Hôpital Bretonneau, Infirmierie Protestante de Lyon, Médipôle de Savoie, Hôpital Foch, and CHU Rouen Normandie - Hôpital Charles-Nicolle (8 indicators).

Global results. Most French hospitals have managed corporate websites to influence stakeholders’ perceptions and collectively build their brand. However, on average, these organizations only respected 12,39 indicators out of 40 applicable, which proved that French hospitals must improve their online branding initiatives. According to our results, the best hospital in the country was CHU Rouen Normandie - Hôpital Charles-Nicolle, as it was the only organization to comply with all 28 indicators (see Table 4).

Table 4. Best Hospitals

Hospital	Number of indicators respected
CHU Rouen Normandie - Hôpital Charles-Nicolle	28
Hôpital Saint-Joseph	25
CHRU - Hôpital Bretonneau	24
Hôpital Paris Saint-Joseph	23
Hôpital Foch	
CHU Saint-Étienne - Hôpital Bellevue	
CHU Lille - Hôpital Claude-Huriez*	22
CHU Lille - Hôpital Salengro*	
Centre Hospitalier Saint Joseph et Saint Luc	21
CHU Montpellier - Hôpital Lapeyronie	20
Infirmierie Protestante de Lyon	

*Both hospitals used the same website

Discussion

Promoting the hospital brand through corporate websites presents a challenge, as it involves navigating legal frameworks, ethical constraints, global competition, and the evolving information and emotional needs of stakeholders. To overcome these barriers, hospitals invest in corporate communication and recruit experts in digital branding. Our results showed that 99% of the French hospitals considered in this analysis used their corporate websites to share content with stakeholders; however, they only respected, on average, 12.39 out of 40 applicable brand indicators. On the other hand, several hospitals belonging to the same group, such as CHU Lille, CHU Bordeaux, and Hospices Civils de Lyon, used the same website structure, and most information was the same. These two facts suggest that most French hospitals did not view their websites as a corporate communication tool; instead, they considered them a platform to share administrative information with key stakeholders, such as patients and employees.

Most French hospitals excluded media from their branding, posing a reputational risk as groups like older adults rely on media for medical information

Doctors and nurses help patients fulfill their medical needs from a global perspective: medical treatments, emotional support, and social protection (Fittipaldi, O'Dwyer, Henriques, 2021). This engagement with patients' rights to health enhances hospitals' scientific credibility (Zhao, 2021), improves their medical outcomes (Troiseufs, 2020), and strengthens the hospital's public image and reputation (Shieh et al., 2020). In other words, healthcare professionals play a key role in hospitals' branding processes. However, our data proved that most French hospitals did not consider doctors and nurses as key elements for their collective branding processes. Only 27,87% of French hospitals shared information about the innovation projects their healthcare professionals were leading in collaboration with external partners, such as other hospitals, research centers, universities, or public authorities. Besides, only 9.84% of hospitals displayed information about their doctors' and nurses' professional backgrounds, including academic qualifications, experience in other hospitals, collaborations with public authorities, grants, awards, scientific publications, and research interests. These two facts revealed that most French hospitals did not understand the role of healthcare professionals in these organizations' branding processes, which constitutes a reputational risk that affects both hospitals and healthcare professionals.

Patients have become the most critical stakeholders, as their behaviors significantly influence the perceptions of other stakeholders regarding the hospital (Tomokawa et al., 2021). For this reason, these organizations implement initiatives to reinforce their patients' empowerment (Navarro, 2020) and promote decision-making processes among them, doctors, and nurses (Marca, Frigola, Menéndez, Compte & Massana, 2020). Both initiatives—empowerment and collective decision-making processes—positively influence patients' perceptions of the hospital (Stellefson, Paige, & Chaney, 2020). Our quantitative analysis revealed that most hospitals in France efficiently promoted patients' empowerment and collective decision-making processes by sharing medical information with them, such as lists of diseases and treatments (95,83%), appointment checklists (62,5%), and digital tools- online portals, mobile applications- that patients could use to understand better their diseases, treatments and hospital's internal functioning (60,42%). However, only 9,83% of hospitals shared information about patients' experiences (treatments, relationships with doctors, communication with nurses), which constitutes a mistake since this information could help hospitals establish an emotional connection with patients. In other words, French hospitals should find a balance between promoting patients' empowerment and establishing an emotional connection with them: this way, these organizations will build their brands more efficiently.

Hospitals collaborate with media companies in many areas: they launch health education campaigns to educate citizens (Bange, Huh, Novin, Hui & Yi, 2019), organize workshops to reinforce patients' health literacy skills (Gever & Ezeah, 2020), and implement advocacy campaigns addressed to governments to protect people's right to quality medical information (Ratzan, Sommariva, Rauh, 2020). This engagement with people's right to quality information is crucial in the era of social media, where misinformation about healthcare-related issues poses a significant public health threat (Reyna, 2020). However, our results revealed that most French hospitals did not make enough efforts to collaborate with media companies in a professional way. Only 2,04% of hospitals had a health library for journalists to consult medical information. On the other hand, most French hospitals did not develop material that

media companies could use to prepare their news: only 22,45% of hospitals displayed corporate videos (interviews with doctors, medical conferences, research projects), and no hospital had a newsletter to keep journalists updated about the hospital's latest news. In other words, most French hospitals did not integrate media companies into their collective branding processes, which constitutes a reputational risk since several population groups, such as older adults, trust media companies as a source of medical information.

This paper highlighted areas that French hospitals should consider to improve their Internet branding campaigns, particularly those related to integrating healthcare professionals and patients into the organization's collective branding processes. However, the ideas presented in this paper must be carefully considered, as some limitations affected this research. First, we did not contact each hospital's corporate communications department to gain a better understanding of their Internet communication strategies. Second, we did not analyze stakeholders' perceptions about hospitals' use of websites for branding purposes. Third, we did not consider the legal framework in France, which highly affects these organizations' communication activities. We recommend that researchers interested in this area focus their efforts on the role of healthcare professionals in hospitals' collective branding processes, the impact of artificial intelligence and big data in hospitals' communication strategies, and the role of the brand on the hospital's internal processes (medical protocols, internal policies, ethical standards).

Conclusion

Most hospitals consider their websites a corporate communication tool that reinforces their relationships with key stakeholders, including employees, patients, media companies, and shareholders. Websites help hospitals implement more dynamic communication strategies that integrate stakeholders into the organization's collective branding processes. Nevertheless, our quantitative data proved that most French hospitals did not follow this professional logic. This paper's primary research question was: What are the main corporate content items that French hospitals share on their websites to reinforce relationships with stakeholders and promote their brands? To answer this question, we proposed three final ideas that describe French hospitals' current branding practices and identify new avenues to help these organizations implement more efficient branding initiatives on their websites.

Even if 99% of French hospitals had a corporate website, they only respected 12,39 branding indicators out of 40 applicable. In other words, most French hospitals used their websites to share administrative information, such as medical procedures, patient instructions, and legal documents, but not to promote the hospital's brand identity, values, history, or social impact. This fact revealed that most hospitals in France did not view their websites as a corporate communication tool, but rather as an administrative platform, posing a reputational risk to all of them. These organizations should evolve from their current "conservative approach" to a "branding approach," which involves developing online annual content plans that help stakeholders understand the uniqueness of the hospital brand and its impact on society. To efficiently do that, these organizations' communication departments must implement professional research processes to understand stakeholders' perceptions and find synergies with the hospital's medical, organizational, and communication goals.

Our quantitative data revealed that only 61,2% of French hospitals had a section for healthcare professionals, constituting a reputational risk since doctors and nurses are key stakeholders in these organizations' collective branding processes. Besides, hospitals with this section mainly shared information about the organization's internal structure, specifically laboratories (91.80%) and clinical trials (49.18%). They did not mention elements essential to building the hospital brand, such as collaborations between the hospital's doctors and nurses with external organizations (13,11%) or the professional background of doctors and nurses working at the hospital (9,84%). In other words, most French hospitals did not use their employees' expertise to build a more credible brand. These organizations should implement personal branding programs to promote their healthcare professionals' public image, reinforce the hospital's scientific credibility, and build a more reputable brand. Additionally, they should explore ways to integrate healthcare professionals more efficiently into the hospital's website and train them to utilize this platform for branding purposes, including online consultations, workshops, and conferences.

Finally, most French hospitals used their "patients" section to share information about diseases and treatments (95,83%) or appointment checklists (62,5%), but not for publishing information that contributed to building the hospital brand collectively, such as patients' experiences with doctors and nurses (9,83%) or support groups for patients suffering from similar diseases (8,33%). This conservative approach does not facilitate hospitals in establishing

emotional relationships with patients, making it challenging to implement collective branding processes. French hospitals' communication departments should develop branding communication initiatives that enable patients to interact with healthcare professionals in a more personalized manner. For instance, they could organize online conferences about health trends, hold workshops in the hospital to train patients in medical technology, or launch joint programs with patient associations to promote health rights. This dynamic approach will enable French hospitals to establish more emotional relationships with patients and integrate them into the organization's collective branding processes.

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Data availability

Data are available by contacting the author on his professional email.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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