


# Chapter 10

## Immersive Storytelling and Mental Wellness in Medical Tourism: From Emotional Narratives to Metaverse Healing Spaces

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter develops the immersive storytelling-wellness framework (ISWF) to explain how digital storytelling, immersive technologies, and metaverse environments can foster mental wellness in medical tourism. Drawing upon the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and the Broaden-and-Build Theory, the framework conceptualizes a psychosocial mechanism through which immersive experiences transform patients' anxiety into trust, control, and connectedness. Storytelling provides emotional meaning and empathy; immersive technology (augmented reality, virtual reality, and mixed reality) strengthens psychological control and preparedness; while the metaverse sustains social belonging and digital empathy across borders. The chapter synthesizes findings from interdisciplinary research in tourism, healthcare marketing, and human-technology interaction, proposing an ethical and human-centered model for digital healing. It also highlights theoretical and practical implications for healthcare providers, policymakers, and destination marketers.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-6881-8.ch010

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Medical tourism is becoming a strategic component of the global service economy, with millions of patients traveling across borders each year in search of treatment, rehabilitation, or wellness combined with a vacation (Karadayi-Usta, 2025; Zhong & Chan, 2024). Foundational research suggests that this growth is driven by a variety of factors: cost differentials, technical capabilities, national prestige, and the search for holistic physical and mental recovery (Connell, 2006; Cooper, 2015; Hieda, 2015; Palomino, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). However, most current models of medical tourism marketing still focus on the functional-economic effectiveness of the service, while the patient's emotional well-being, particularly anxiety, loss of control, and lack of security when receiving treatment in an unfamiliar environment, has received little attention as a core component of the experience. In reality, the international patient journey is a complex psychological process: from information search, decision making, preparation, treatment experience to recovery and feedback (Cooper, 2015; Hieda, 2015). At each stage, they face higher uncertainty and stress than domestic patients.

Recent studies have shown that storytelling is an effective tool in evoking empathy, increasing trust, and promoting positive behavior, through the mechanism of narrative transport and emotional engagement (Casado-Aranda et al., 2021; Crespo et al., 2023; Júnior et al., 2023; Patwa et al., 2022). When combined with immersive technologies (augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR)), storytelling not only conveys information but also allows viewers to experience the setting, characters, and process, thereby transforming emotions from anxiety to trust and reassurance (Hardie et al., 2020; Mo et al., 2024).

Studies on immersive technologies in tourism and healthcare have provided considerable evidence. In tourism, the presence factor increases visit intention and satisfaction (Ahmed et al., 2024). In healthcare, VR and AR are used to reduce pre-operative anxiety, guide patients through treatment procedures, and create a sense of control (Khan et al., 2024; Msweli & Phahlane, 2025; Raj & Chandwani, 2025). However, most of this work has focused on domestic experiences or professional training, and has not yet expanded to cross-border medical tourism, where culture, trust, and psychological security play a more decisive role.

At the same time, the metaverse is opening up a new dimension for the organization and management of experiences. Recent papers have noted the potential of the metaverse to create a space for spiritual healing, connecting patients with physicians, families, and communities, while maintaining continuous emotional support (Roy et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2025). Although still in its infancy, the metaverse allows for the expansion of storytelling from linear narratives to a living storytelling ecosystem

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