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**The role of online tourist communication in the promotion of medical tourism: Study with a sample of Algerian tourists who have chosen Tunisia as a treatment destination.**

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**Abstract:**

The objective of this study is twofold: first, to discuss the joint relationship between the quality of medical services and the development of the tourism sector, then to analyze the contribution of online communication by trip to Algeria for the promotion of medical tourism in Tunisia. By opting for a quantitative approach and using questionnaires distributed to a sample of patients and their parents who have already benefited from a medical stay in Tunisia, the results of this study will attempt to highlight the role played by medical agencies of travel through their online communication in encouraging these patients to choose Tunisia as a destination for a medical stay.

**Keywords:** online tourist communication - medical tourism - medical tourist destination - social networks - travel agencies.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

By medical tourism, also called health care travel, we mean traveling across the border to obtain health care, which may or may not be offered in the country of residence (Monica, 2012). It refers to the movement of patients in need of medical care in a country other than their own country to benefit from a care offer that is not available or inaccessible at home. For the governments that encourage this growing trend of tourism, this movement of the sick constitutes an opportunity that offers opportunities to develop tourism policy in the host countries.

Therefore, undertaking actions that promote and support health tourism (borgne, 2007) and improve the quality of care services in a tourist territory is one of the most effective strategies for attracting tourists and promoting the image of a tourist destination. (Prayag, 2009).

For Algerians, Tunisia is one of the most visited medical destinations (Ghosli, 2006) in addition to Turkey and France. In their search for medical destinations, the use of the Internet in general and social networks in particular is essential (Frías, 2012) for patients and their parents. The pages of travel agencies offering medical travel services and hospital appointments are one of the most consulted sources of information for finding and choosing a medical destination. In this sense, the online tourist communication (Makian, 2018) of travel agencies plays a determined role in the transmission of information allowing the construction of an image of a tourist territory.

Travel agencies generally offer services aimed at facilitating the organization of a trip for their customers. They are involved in all stages of booking, travel, accommodation and some administrative procedures (visa application, travel insurance, making appointments). The development of the activities of online travel agencies makes it possible to offer the same services provided by traditional remote agencies in a simpler, easier and faster way.

Travel agencies, like all profit-making businesses, are experiencing real changes and upheavals in the organization and conduct of all marketing activities with the arrival of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The integration of the Internet into the work of travel agencies is a significant asset in attracting a large number of consumers of tourist products (ballesteros, 2010). The acquisition of electronic boxes, the installation of a website and the creation of several pages on the various social networks are the advantages offered by the net for the development of the work of these agencies.

This proposal focuses on the study of the online communication of travel agencies and their role in promoting the image of medical tourist destinations. It revolves around the following question:

**What is the contribution of travel agencies' online communication to promoting the image of a destination for a health trip?**

To provisionally answer the main question, three hypotheses are put forward:



**Hypothesis 01:** The image of a medical destination is decisive for the selection of a treatment destination.

**Hypothesis 02:** The communication of travel agencies contributes significantly to the construction of the image of a medical tourist destination.

**Hypothesis 03:** The means of online communication lead to the promotion of the image of a medical tourist destination.

The objective of this presentation is twofold: first, to discuss the joint relationship between the quality of medical services and the development of the tourism sector, then to analyze the contribution of online communication by trip to Algeria for the promotion of medical tourism in Tunisia. By opting for a quantitative approach and using questionnaires distributed to a sample of patients and their parents who have already benefited from a medical stay in Tunisia, the results of this study will attempt to highlight the role played by medical agencies of travel through their online communication in encouraging these patients to choose Tunisia as a destination for a medical stay.

## **2. Revue de la littérature**

### **2.1 Tunisia, a treatment destination in North Africa:**

Medical tourism, also called health tourism or care tourism, consists of seeking treatment in a country other than the one where you live. This move may be motivated by the quality of care, competitive costs or the unavailability of certain treatments in the country of residence. One can, thus, stay in a destination in order to make general or specialized medical consultations, to carry out surgical interventions, to carry out medical examinations, to have access to cosmetic surgery, hair implantation, etc...

This medical stay may be motivated by the performance of certain delicate medical interventions that are not authorized or not developed in the country of residence, such as: an intervention to terminate a pregnancy, euthanasia, benefit from an organ transplant or even responsible for some addiction and dependence problems.

For some authors, long-term travel to a foreign destination to seek treatment and benefit from medical care cannot be considered tourism. For these authors, the notion of tourism is associated with recreational services, but travel undertaken for the purpose of care is not associated with recreational services. However, certain medical acts offered to travelers thermal cures, thalassotherapy, cosmetic surgery are often linked and associated with a tourist approach. Several people thus take the plane to rest, to take a cure in search of their well-being.

The medical tourism sector continues to grow around the world. The figures given by health organizations testify to the sharp increase in mobility flows for care purposes (Menvielle, 2012). Medical tourism is currently one of the mainstays of tourism in general in many countries. In Africa, the Tunisian destination is the main medical tourist destination. Ranked second in Africa (chirurgiepro, 2019), after South Africa, Tunisia attracts more and



more tourists who visit it to benefit from all the care offers that its health establishments provide. The range of medical offers and services that Tunisia offers for its visitors makes it a main medical destination in North Africa. Tunisia's reputation as a medical tourism destination can be largely due to the development of the private health sector on the one hand, the activity of medical agencies specializing in medical tourism and the strategic location on the other hand. .

Indeed, and according to the Oxford Business Group, the private health sector in Tunisia has grown considerably over the past two decades. Private health establishments in Tunisia have 6,000 beds in 2019. And according to the president of the National Health Federation, this number should reach 10,000 by 2024 (North Africa Health, 2020). The public health sector in Tunisia has 2,058 basic health centers and 167 hospitals, including 23 university hospitals. The private sector has 90 private clinics, with a capacity of more than 5,000 beds, pending the upcoming opening of 75 new clinics under construction with a capacity of 8,000 beds (webmanagercenter, 2018).

Tunisia receives about 500,000 foreign patients who seek inpatient care in Tunisian hospitals, and about 2–2.5 million foreign patients use outpatient care (chirurgiepro, 2019). These international patients are most often from neighboring countries such as Algeria and Libya, but a significant number also come from sub-Saharan Africa. These tourists mainly choose Tunisia for treatment. This choice could be motivated by the quality of the training of health professionals, the quality of the equipment made available to them and the costs which are extremely competitive.

Nearly 80% of these patients come from North African countries. While 10% come from Western European countries. The rest comes mainly from sub-Saharan African countries. North Africans and Sub-Saharans generally travel for advanced surgical procedures in the fields of cardiology, orthopedics, ophthalmology, gynecology or even urology. Tunisia thus offers them care that is not provided at home (chirurgiepro, 2019).

Europeans are rather attracted by the reputation of Tunisian doctors in the field of cosmetic surgery and ophthalmological and dental care: this care is not, or very little, covered by insurance in their country (chirurgiepro, 2019).

## **2.2 Online tourist communication and the image of a tourist destination:**

Tourism communication can be defined as a considerable set of means and media that disseminate images of territories. For Frustier and Perroy, tourism communication includes all activities that have an impact on tourist attendance and which therefore influence the tourist's decision-making process (Makian, 2018). Its main objective is the transmission of the message which must make the consumer (tourist) pass from the cognitive stage or the affective stage or the combative stage, that is to say, he must influence him to act in this way the objectives of the communication will be identified according to the target audience (Makian, 2018).



The contribution of new information and communication technologies to the development of all the tasks of travel agencies is obvious. This technical progress is considered a revolution that has allowed companies to abolish physical distance (Didaoui, 2021). Indeed, with the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has offered opportunities in terms of saving time and allowed the circumvention of several obstacles related to travel.

The emergence of new information and communication technologies and the digital evolution in the tourist field has given rise to the virtual market, to the connected consumer (tourist) (VANHEEMS Régine, 2018). The tourist of today has the possibility of carrying out more and more research of information and tourist destinations online thanks to the connection objects. By his mobile phone, or by his computer, the tourist can book transport tickets, hotel rooms and various tourist promotions at any time, at any place and with ease. The possibility and facilitation of payment via the internet has also made travel plans easier. Digital media give access to social networks, and to different virtual communities, which allow tourists to get information and exchange with other people on the Internet. It is also possible for him to consult the various sites of travel agencies, to contact them and to interact with these service providers, thus giving rise to what is called the connected and interactive tourist (Franck, 2007).

The advent of information technology is dramatically changing the traditional view of travel marketing. ICTs thus offer tourist destinations an opportunity in terms of visibility and image promotion. There is no promotion without communication. Communication therefore appears to be an essential tool for promoting the image of a tourist destination (Teguig, 2020). The arrival in force of the Internet and its role as a source of information and communication, and the integration of ICT in tourism marketing and become an essential means for the promotion of the image of which it is considered a tool of Direct marketing.

The image of the tourist destination plays an essential role in the choice of tourists. The image of a destination is understood to be a continuous mental process through which contains a set of impressions, emotional thoughts, beliefs and prejudices concerning a destination due to the information obtained from different channels (Kim, 2016). The image of a destination is made up of the set of mental representations, both affective and cognitive, (Gardès, 2013) that an individual or a group of individuals associate with a destination. It comprises two main components:

The cognitive or perceptual component refers to beliefs or knowledge about ratings of attributes of a destination.

An affective component that refers to the feelings aroused by a place, people with different motivations can evaluate a destination in the same way.

Image formation is defined as the construction of a mental representation of a destination based on information provided by image-forming agents and selected by a person (Tasci, 2007). The destination image is formed through a complex process, in which tourists develop a mental construct based on a few selected impressions gathered from a flood of impressions.



This flood of impressions is conveyed by all the messages received by the receivers in different situations of tourist communication.

### **3. Materials and methods:**

In this part, we will try to define the research methodology adopted for the realization of this study. This makes it possible to justify the various methodological choices made for the elaboration of the empirical part. The objective of this part is to define the research method, present the tool for collecting data in the field, describe the sampling method and the size of the sample and the methods for processing the data collected.

This research is quantitative, through a questionnaire distributed to patients and their parents who have already stayed in Tunisia for medical purposes, the study aims to collect a large volume of data on the image of Tunisia as a medical destination for Algerian and the role played by the online communication tools of travel agencies in Algeria in promoting this image.

To do this, the questionnaire made up of 21 questions is organized into three main axes. After the presentation of the framework of the survey and its objectives, the first part of this questionnaire which consists of 05 is devoted to the personal data of the respondents. The following part composed of 8 questions corresponds to the research and the description of the online communication of the travel agencies frequented by the respondents and the various communication tools used by these companies to promote the image of Tunisia. While the last axis of this questionnaire which includes 08 questions aims to determine the image of Tunisia as a medical destination among respondents and their satisfaction with their medical stays in this country.

In order to define the characteristics of the people to be interviewed, and to determine the size of the sample and the different units that make it up, a list of criteria for including and excluding tourists has been drawn up. The study population was thus defined as any Algerian person who had stayed in Tunisia for medical purposes and who had used a travel agency to organize their trip. The three criteria taken into consideration, therefore, for the definition of the people to be interviewed are the Algerian nationality, the medical stay in Tunisia and the use of travel agencies.

To identify and choose the sample units for this study, the snowball method was adopted. This is based on the assumption that medical tourists know each other either through the travel agencies that bring them together or through networking on social networks and various virtual discussion forums. Indeed, the contact of some travel agencies made it possible to reach some tourists who directed me in turn towards other patients. Contact with the latter enabled data to be collected from a snowball sample. The data collection opened over four weeks between August and September 2022 made it possible to reach 32 people.

It is important to specify that this is a non-probability sample. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be generalized. They only concern the 32 people questioned between

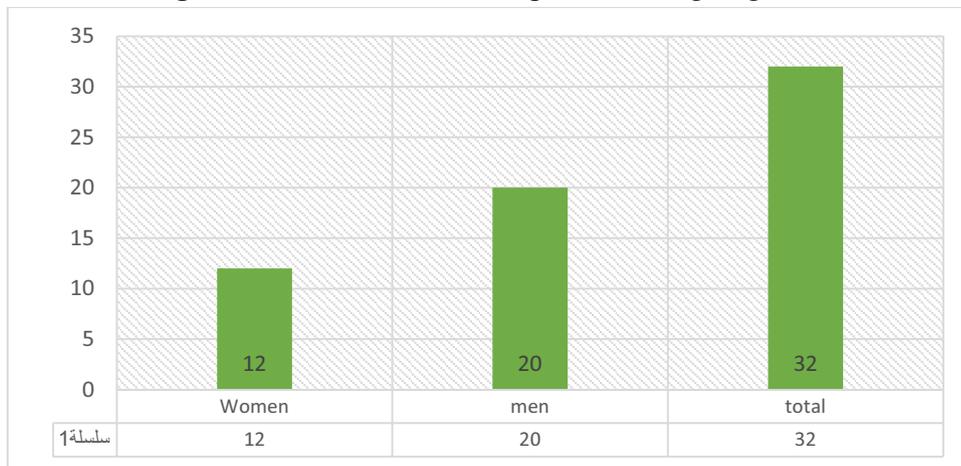


patients and parents of patients meeting the inclusion criteria established above. The analyzes that follow in the next section relate only to the respondents who took part in our survey.

**4. Data analysis and interpretation:**

The analysis of the results of our empirical study addresses three elements: first, the analysis of the profile and the identification of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents constituting the sample of the study. Secondly, the description of the online tourist communication of travel agencies, then the discussion of the image of Tunisia as a medical tourist destination for Algerians.

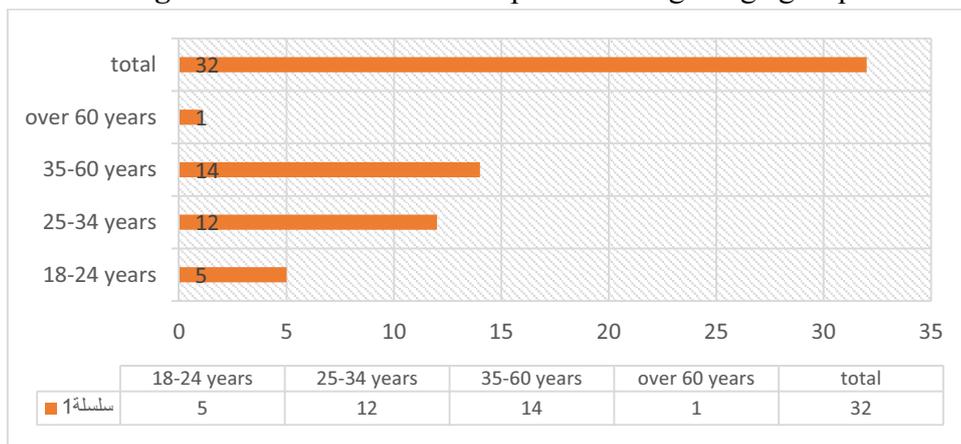
**Fig.1.** The distribution of sample according to gender



Source: Field Data

The analysis of the data collected in the field as part of our survey makes it possible to identify the profile of the units in the research sample. The five questions of the questionnaire devoted to personal data deal with the sex of the respondents, the age group, the level of study, the profession and the monthly salary of each one. The graph presented in Figure 01 shows that the study sample is made up of approximately two-thirds, or 62.5%, of men and more than a third, or 37.5%, of women.

**Fig.2.** The distribution of sample according to age group

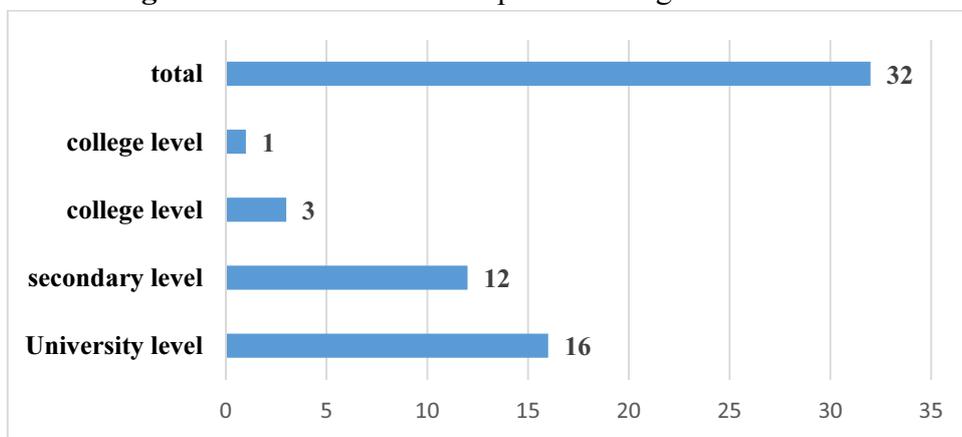


Source: Field Data



The second figure presented above, gives more information on the interviewees. It presents the distribution of respondents according to their age group. It can be easily noticed that most of the respondents are divided into two main brackets: the bracket ranging from 25 to 34 years old with a percentage of 37.5% of all respondents and the bracket from 35 to 60 years old which corresponds to a percentage of 43.75% of all participants in this survey. While the sections of the extremities (the youngest and oldest) record low rates.

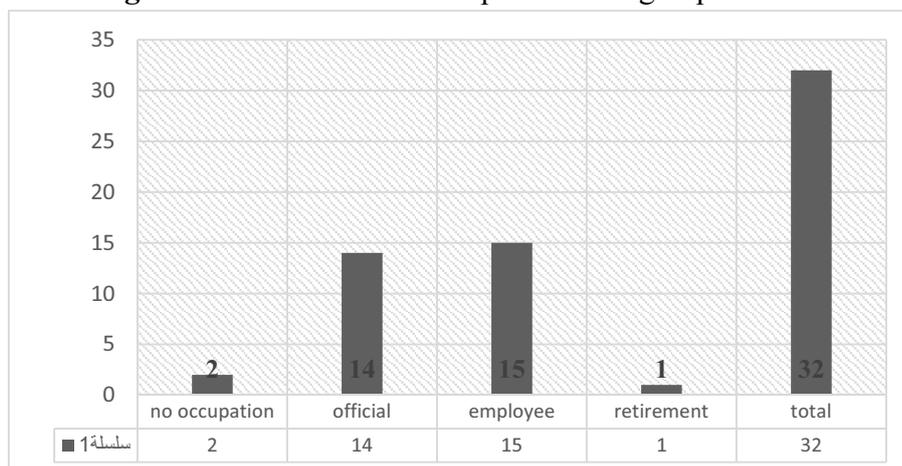
**Fig.3.** The distribution of sample according to school level



Source: Field Data

In order to identify the educational level of the respondents to deepen their socio-demographic profile, a question is devoted to it. The results are presented in figure N 03. Analysis of this figure shows that half of the people questioned, 50% of all respondents, are university graduates. 37.5% of survey participants are at secondary level. This implies that almost more than three thirds of the tourists responding to the questionnaire have some level of education.

**Fig.4.** The distribution of sample according to profession

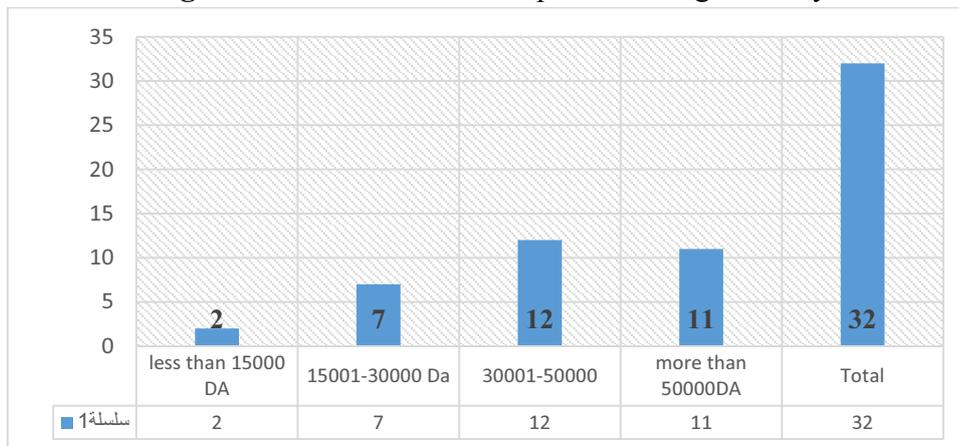


Source: Field Data



Figure 04 presents the distribution of respondents in our survey sample according to their socio-professional category. It essentially emerges from this figure that the majority of our respondents belong to the two categories “employee, civil servant” with respective rates of 15 people thus representing a percentage of 46.87% and 14 people or 43.75% of the entire sample . The two categories, no profession and retired, have lower rates, they are few in the study sample: only one person out of the 32 is retired and only two respondents are without profession.

**Fig.5.** The distribution of sample according to salary



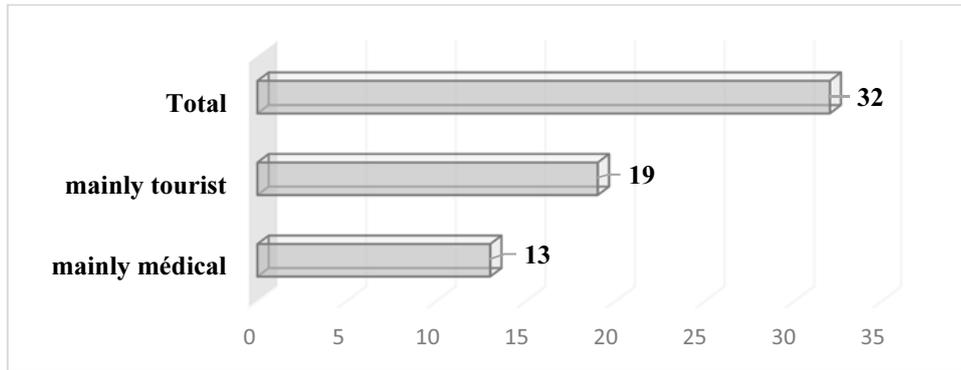
Source: Field Data

One of the parameters sought for the identification of the socioeconomic profile of the participants in the study is the salary. The aim is to analyze the financial capacity of the respondents and the choice of Tunisia as a medical tourist destination. The analysis of the results presented in the figure N05 makes it possible to note that more than two thirds of the units of the sample is 71.87% have a salary which exceeds 30000 DA. 37.5% have a salary that varies between 30,000 and 50,000 DA and 34.37% of respondents have a salary that exceeds 50,000 DA. It is also remarkable in the figure that less than a third of the respondents have a salary of less than 30,000 DA and 02 people out of the 32 participants even have a salary of less than 15,000 DA.

**4.1. The online tourism communication of the travel agencies consulted by the respondents:**

**Fig.6.** Answers to the question: what is the main reason for your visit to Tunisia?

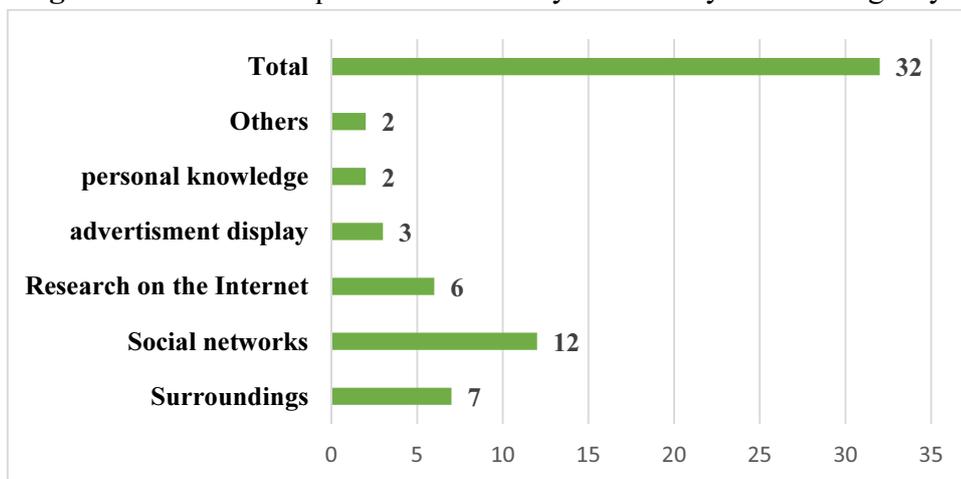
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Source: Field Data

The graph in the figure above attempts to question whether tourists who stayed in Tunisia for medical reasons spent their stay only for treatment or took advantage of their presence in a tourist country to visit its monuments. The results obtained show that almost two-thirds of the respondents, or 59.37% , make their stay in Tunisia both a medical and tourist stay, compared to 40.63% of the participants who declare that their stay is devoted to medical care and treatment.

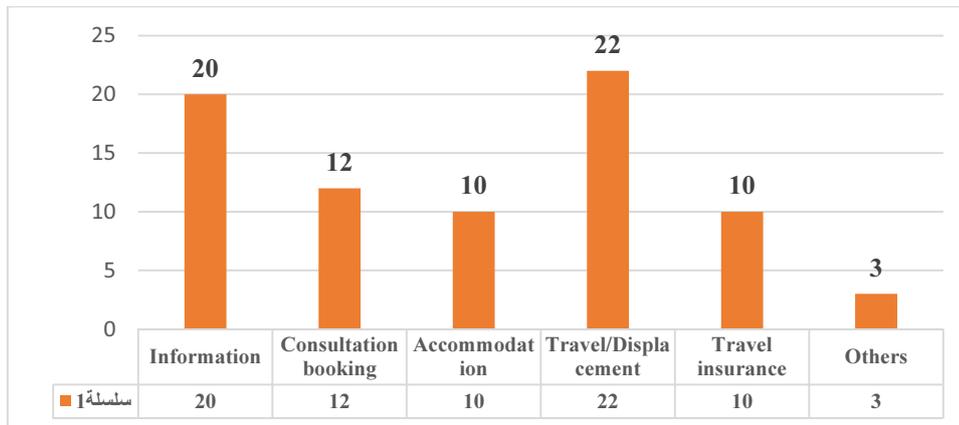
**Fig.7.** Answers to the question: How did you choose your travel agency?



Source: Field Data

The bar chart in Figure N07 shows how respondents chose their travel agency. Of the various proposals, three categories are the most repeated in respondents' responses. It is very easy to see in the figure that the entourage, social networks and internet searches greatly helped the participants in the survey in the choice of their travel agency. We notice that 37.5% of our respondents chose their travel agency thanks to social networks. A percentage of 18.75% corresponds to the number of respondents who chose their agency based on online research and 21.85% relied on advice and guidance from those around them by word of mouth.

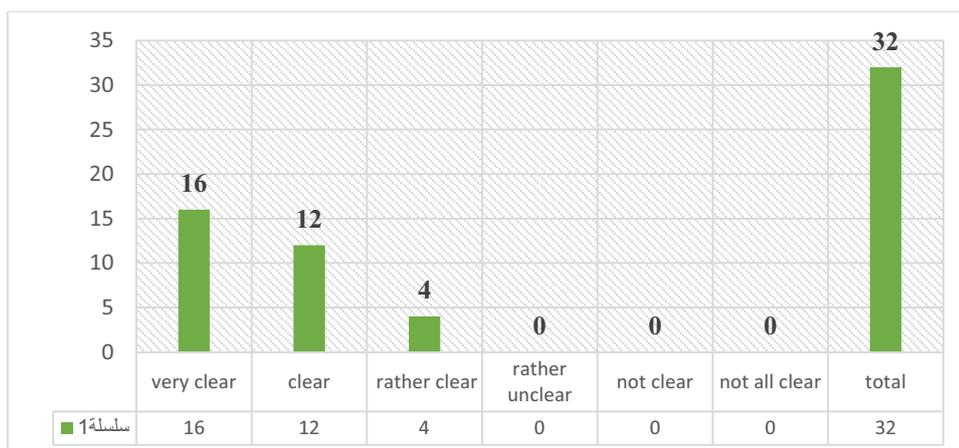
**Fig.8.** Answers to the question: What are the services offered by online travel agencies?



Source: Field Data

The graph presented in Figure 08 lists the main services offered by travel agencies for people who have stayed in Tunisia. According to respondents' answers, their travel agency played an important role in organizing their trip. Between information, reservation of consultations, reservation of accommodation and planning of the journey and the various displacements, the travel agencies offer a diversified palette of services. The main tasks carried out by these agencies, according to the answers of the respondents, are essentially information, accommodation and travel, which occupy the top of the list of answers from the respondents. Nevertheless, the analysis of the answers shows the role that can be played by travel agencies in booking and making appointments for medical consultations in Tunisia. They can also intervene to send the medical file and obtain an estimate.

Fig.9. Answers to the question: How do you find the online content of the travel agencies you work with?



Source: Field Data

In order to examine the online communication of travel agencies, two questions respectively address the clarity of the content on the websites and social network pages managed by these companies and the different strengths of the communication of these said agencies. For the first point, all of the respondents, ie 100% of the entire sample, answered clearly. Half, or 50% , appreciate the clarity of the messages broadcast online by their travel

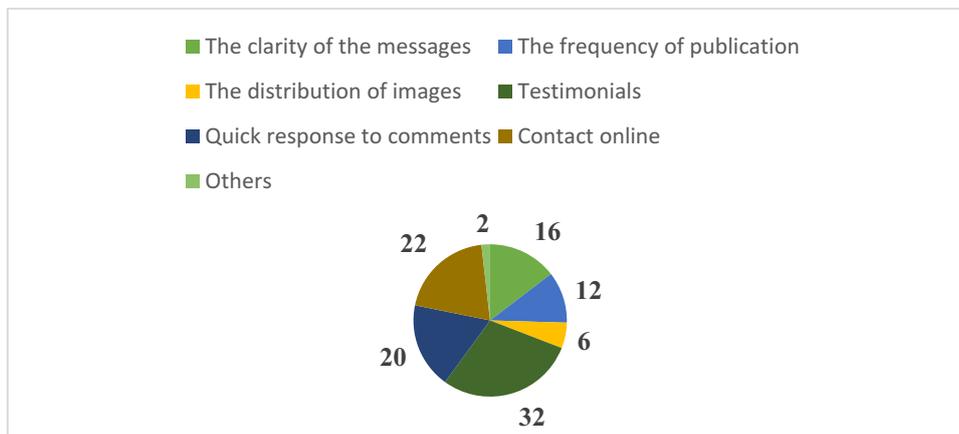
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agency, answering very clearly and 37.5% answered clearly. This can be explained both by the simplicity of the content as a communication strategy of travel agencies and by the educational level of the respondents who are mostly university graduates.

For the second point, respondents cited several strengths of the online communication of travel agencies that organized and planned their stay in Tunisia. The multitude of strengths could be partly explained by the difference in the travel agencies consulted by the respondents.

**Fig.10.** Answers to the question: What is the strength of your travel agency's online communication?

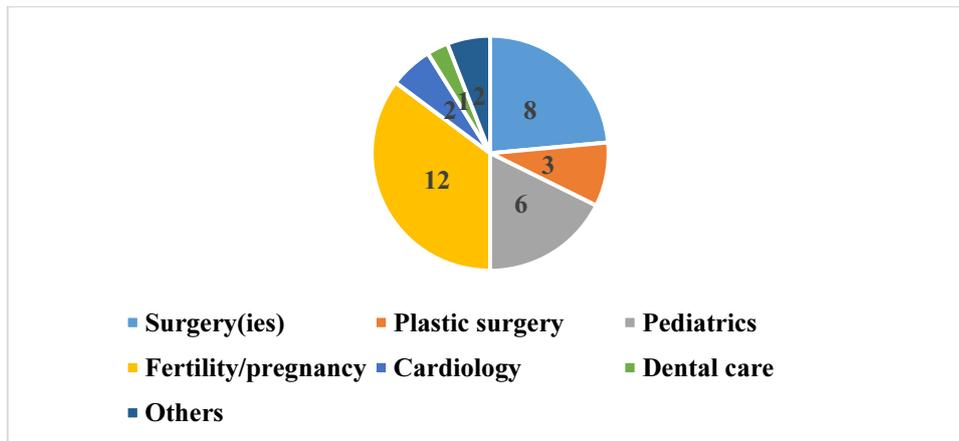


Source: Field Data

Firstly, we can see that the respondents greatly appreciate the sharing of experience and the testimonials disseminated on the pages of the agencies. These testimonials concern either the coverage by the travel agency or the quality of the medical stay in Tunisia. The results also show that respondents agree favorably about the possibility of online contact with agencies, this allows them to save effort and travel time. In addition, the rapid response to complaints and comments from users of agency sites and pages gives a good impression to respondents who consider it one of the strengths of online communication for travel companies. Other elements are also cited as strong points of travel agency online communication such as: the frequency of publications, the clarity of messages and the association of text and images.

**4.2. The image of Tunisia as a medical destination:**

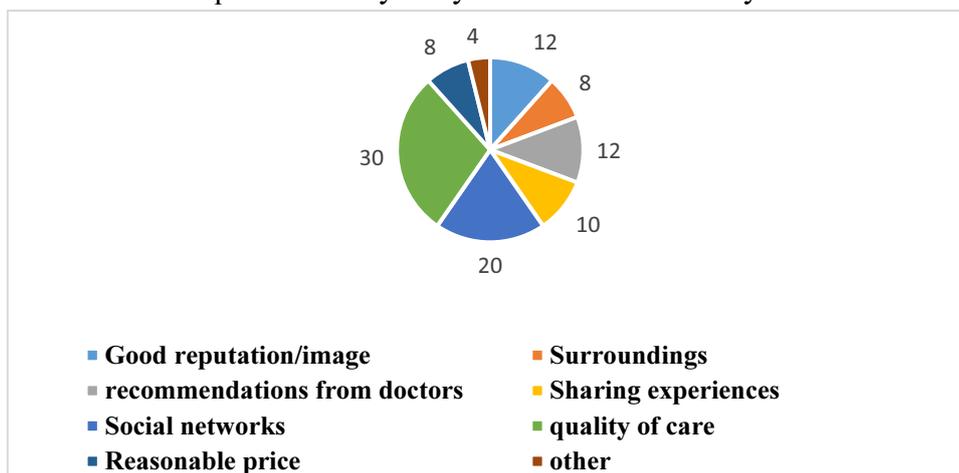
**Fig.11.** Answers to the question: for what medical reason did you choose Tunisia?



Source: Field Data

The pie chart in Figure N10 shows the different medical reasons for which participants in this survey stayed in Tunisia. Data analysis shows that the main medical reasons that prompted respondents to seek treatment in Tunisia are: exploration of infertility and pregnancy problems, surgical interventions, pediatric consultations and cosmetic surgery. Of all the respondents to the questionnaire, 12 people or 37.5% chose Tunisia to take care of their reproductive problems. 8 individuals have medical reasons to undergo surgery and 6 tourists, or 18.75% , go to Tunisia to benefit from a pediatric consultation for children. . The percentage of the sample that stays travels to Tunisia for the following medical reasons: cosmetic surgery, dental care and other reasons. .

**Fig.12.** Answers to the question: Why did you choose Tunisia as your medical destination?



Source: Field Data

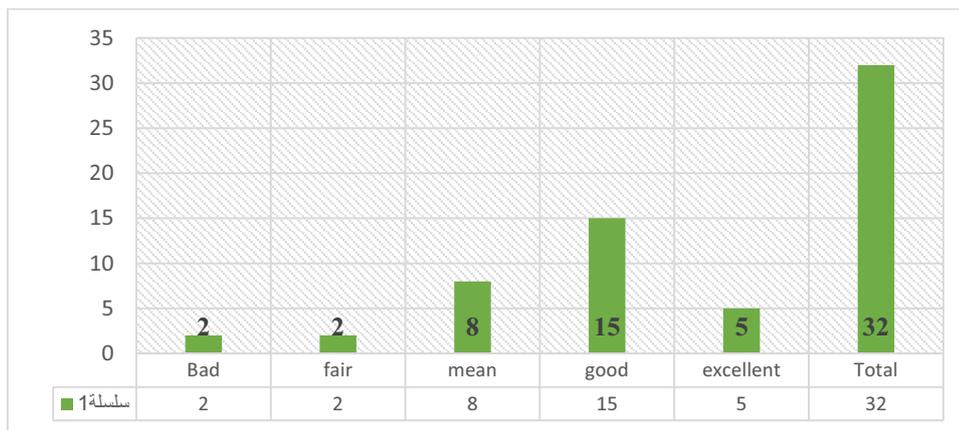
In order to analyze the motivations that led our respondents to choose Tunisia as their health destination, the questionnaire devoted a question aimed at having conclusive answers to the following question: Why did you choose Tunisia as a medical destination? The section above sets out the various arguments put forward. It is important to note that this question is a multiple-choice question; this allowed respondents to give several answers at the same time. The analysis of the data presented in the figure shows the three main motivations that encouraged tourists to choose Tunisia for treatment. Firstly, the quality of care, secondly, the

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good reputation of Tunisian health establishments and the third motivation is shared between the recommendations of medical doctors in Algeria and the testimony and sharing of experience on social networks. Other reasons are less cited by respondents, namely the cost of care, advice from those around them.

**Fig.13.** Answers to the question: Now, what image do you have of Tunisia as a medical destination?

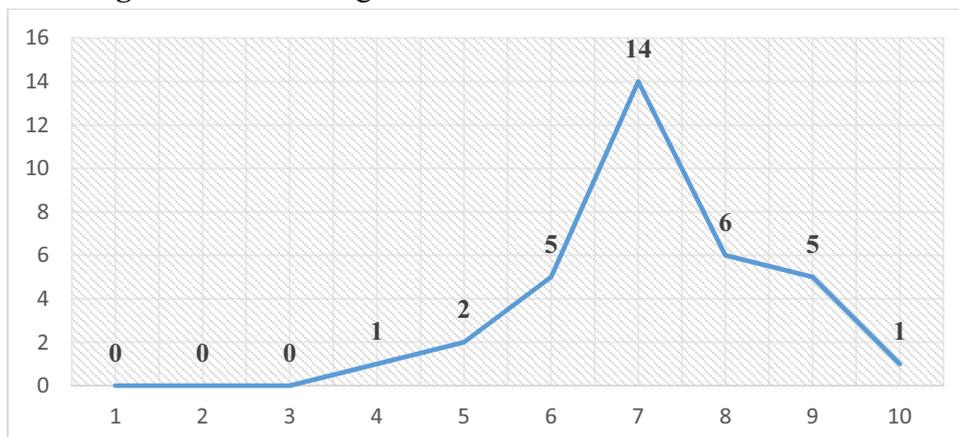


**Source:** Field Data

One of the direct questions posed to respondents and which seek to identify the overall image of Tunisia is question N0. The answers to this question bear witness to the positive impression that tourists have of this country. The image of Tunisia as a treatment destination is perceived favorably by more than 62.5% of all respondents. 20 answers distributed between an excellent and good image prove the positive image formed among visitors to health establishments in Tunisia. In addition, 4 people or 12.5% of the sample perceive the image of this destination negatively.

In addition, in order to assess the affective image of the medical destination, a question was devoted in the questionnaire that asks respondents to rate their attachment to Tunisia on a scale of 0 to 10. The answers to this question were allowed to establish the curve below.

**Fig.14.** affective image/ attachment to the Tunisian destination

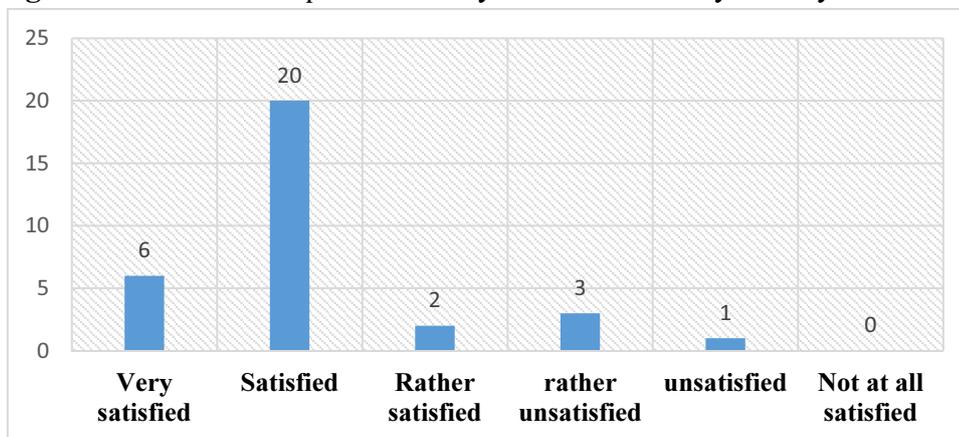




Source: Field Data

After evaluating the overall image of Tunisia as a healthcare destination among respondents, it was deemed important to have an idea of the degree of their attachment to this destination. This makes it possible to consider the affective image of Tunisia. The curve above shows significantly the good affective image expressed by the respondents. A percentage of 81.25% of respondents gave a score greater than or equal to 7/10. The percentages distributed over notes 07, 08, 09 and 10 are respectively 43.75%, 18.75%, 15.62 % and 3.125%. The score most often attributed to the degree of attachment to the destination is the score of 07/20. This reflects the good appreciation of the affective image of the interviewees. Scores less than or equal to 05/10 represent only a percentage of 9.37%.

**Fig.15.** Answers to the question: Are you satisfied with your stay in Tunisia?



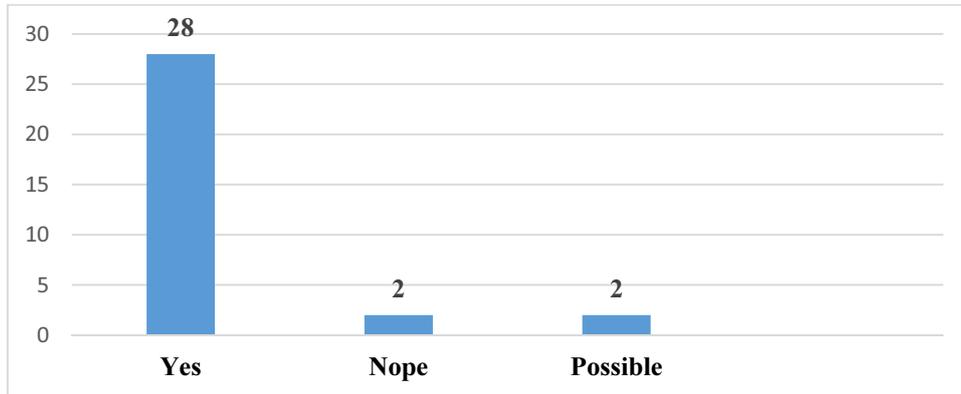
Source: Field Data

In this part of the analysis, the study is interested in evaluating the degree of satisfaction of the people constituting the sample of their medical stay in Tunisia. The figure above shows the different answers given to question N15. Observation of the figure shows the good satisfaction of tourists who have stayed in Tunisia to benefit from medical care. More than three quarters of respondents expressed their satisfaction by both categories: very satisfied and satisfied. With a percentage of 81.25%, respondents to the survey positively assess their care experience in Tunisia. 18.75% of respondents are very satisfied and 62.5% are satisfied against a very low percentage estimated at 3.125% who express disappointment.

These results are consistent with the answers to the question that seeks feedback on the intention of tourists who have stayed in Tunisia to return. The following figure presents all the answers given in three categories: Yes, No and Possible. Of the 32 people questioned, 28 individuals, or 87.5%, expressed their intention to return to Tunisia against only 02 who do not have this intention to return. The figure below shows this.

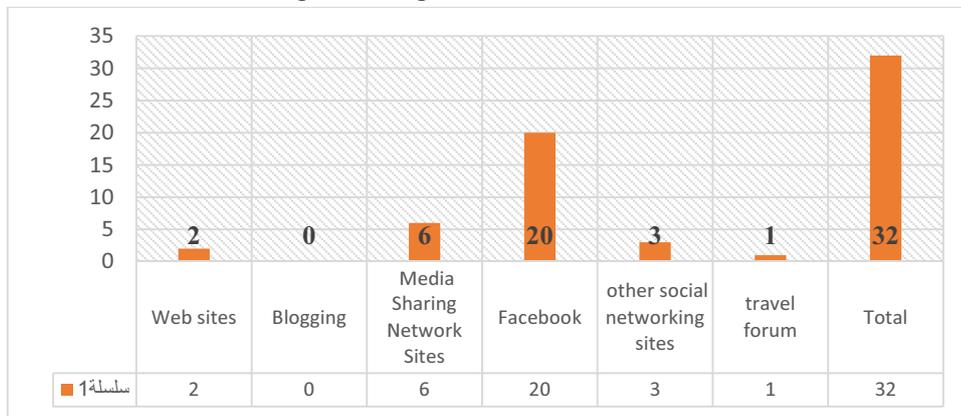
**Fig.16.** Answers to the question: Do you intend to return to Tunisia?

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Source: Field Data

**Fig.16.** Answers to the question: For you, which online communication tool has been the most effective in forming the image of the Tunisian medical destination?



Source: Field Data

In order to better understand and identify the most effective means of travel agency online communication for the participants of this survey to form an image of Tunisia as a medical tourist destination. The answers provided by the latter show that social networks are by far the most effective. 71.87% of respondents believe that social networks are the online communication tools of travel agencies that allow them to build the image of the Tunisian destination and the choice of the latter for their care. Of the 23 people who responded to social networks, 20 respondents or 62.5% said they chose Facebook as the most effective communication tool for building the image of a destination.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through this work, the objective was to discuss the relationship between the online tourist communication of travel agencies and the promotion of the image of a medical tourist destination. This study has demonstrated that the online communication of travel agencies in general and its virtual tools in particular contribute significantly to the promotion of the image of Tunisia as a care destination for Algerians.

The results of this work show that the Algerians participating in this survey who have already stayed in Tunisia for medical reasons have a favorable perception of the image of Tunisia. The effective image of this destination among the respondents constituting the



sample of our study reflects a considerable attachment developed with regard to Tunisia. The latter have expressed their satisfaction with their medical trip to this destination and demonstrate an intention to return.

In addition, the answers of the participants testify more on the role played by the Algerian travel agencies in the organization of their trip to Tunisia. Through a range of services ranging from making appointments, various reservations and travel planning, travel agencies play a key role in the tourist experience of patients and their parents in Tunisia.

In conclusion, the results of this work have shown that the online means of communication used by travel agencies in the dissemination of information, the networking of patients and the contact of customers have contributed to facilitating their travel. All these dimensions contribute positively to promoting Tunisia's image as a healthcare destination. All of these results make it possible to affirm the three hypotheses put forward in the statement of this study.

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