

## **Promoting Gender Reassignment Surgical Service in Thailand among International Transgenders**

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### **Abstract**

Undergoing gender reassignment surgery in Thailand is a significant decision for individuals within the transgender community internationally. The objective of this research is to examine the key communication factors that influence the decision-making process of international transgender persons wishing to undergo gender reassignment surgery in Thailand. This investigation employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Data was collected from the distribution of 530 close-ended questionnaires and 20 in-depth interviews. The study found that there are several advantages to undergoing surgery in Thailand: 1) Thailand is highly regarded for its expert surgeons as well as modern medical equipment and instruments, 2) the cost for the surgery in Thailand is economical and 3) Thailand is a convenient location to visit. Nevertheless, financial difficulty, insufficient information and health issues are concerns that complicate and delay the decision-making process of transgendered persons seeking reassignment surgery. The surgeons are the most important influencer for transgenders' decision making in this case. Therefore, testimony, accreditation and educational background, surgical techniques in addition to reasonable cost should be highlighted in the marketing communication between transgenders and gender reassignment surgical service providers. These features should be brought to light among key stakeholders and strategically communicated by relevant Thai authorities.

*Keywords:* communication, healthcare, gender reassignment surgery, marketing, marketing transgender

## Introduction

Thailand is world-renowned for gender reassignment surgery services among the transgender community. However, the significant decision to undergo surgery is a difficult one to make; the factors influencing decision making processes are therefore worth exploring. In 1978, Dr Preecha Tiewtranon, MD, became the first plastic surgeon to offer sex-change surgery for a transwoman in Thailand. Over time, he developed his surgical techniques and taught his methods to a new generation of Thai surgeons, so more of those suffering from gender dysphoria could change their gender and find greater happiness in life. Now, Thai surgeons conducting these procedures are some of the most respected among physicians worldwide (Sittinew, n.d.). Today, Thailand has emerged as a leader in gender reassignment surgery for a number of reasons including comfort and convenience. Not only can Thai surgery provide customers with a body that performs the most naturally for the new gender, but it also costs much less compared to the service offered in other countries (“Thai doctors don’t daydream,” 2013). Sex-change surgery for a transwoman in Western countries costs about USD 46,361 – USD 62,827 and USD 123,676 – USD 154,578 for a transman. However, in Thailand, the costs average around USD 3,710 – USD 4,636 for a transwoman and USD 12,368 – USD 15,459 for a transman (“Thailand: the land of sex reassignment,” 2012).

The Thai Medical Council enacted regulations and a code of conduct for professional transgender medical treatment in 2009 to prepare for future expansion (“Cosmetic surgery grows,” 2012). Recent changes have suggested that society has also become more accepting (“Cosmetic surgery grows,” 2012). For example, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, stated that sex reassignment surgery could be performed (Amili, 2011). Furthermore, the Miss Universe Pageant changed its rules to allow transwomen to enter the competition in 2018 (Poonpiriya, 2018). This has resulted in more persons deciding to have gender reassignment procedures conducted in Thailand. This number does not only include Thais, but also individuals from the USA, Australia, Europe, China, South Korea, Japan and citizens of ASEAN member countries. Currently, gender reassignment surgery services in Thailand have been developing steadily at a rate of 10 percent annually (“Thailand becoming a world-class medical center,” 2016). According to statistics provided by Yanhee Hospital, during the past three to four years, over 600 men have undergone sex-change surgery to become women while over 400 women have undergone the procedures to become men. Of these individuals, approximately fifty percent were Thai and fifty percent foreigners. These figures help to show how Thailand has become a world leader in gender reassignment procedures, particularly in sex-change surgery, because Thailand is the only country in Asia where sex-change surgery can be performed for both transwomen and transmen in the same hospital (“Cosmetic surgery grows,” 2012).

Developing Thailand to be the world leader of gender reassignment surgery services is very feasible, but to achieve this, Thailand must develop marketing strategies that best target individuals and provide them with the correct information. Although this health service industry has become more accepted, little research is conducted on transsexuals in Thailand. In a search for data conducted for this research, no studies were found dealing with transmen nor studies on any link between transgender persons and the gender reassignment health services industry, creating a large gap in this field of knowledge. A survey conducted in 2015 showed that only 116 health studies of transsexuals had been conducted worldwide (Asia Pacific Transgender Network, 2015) as displayed in a map showing the distribution of the research in Figure 1.

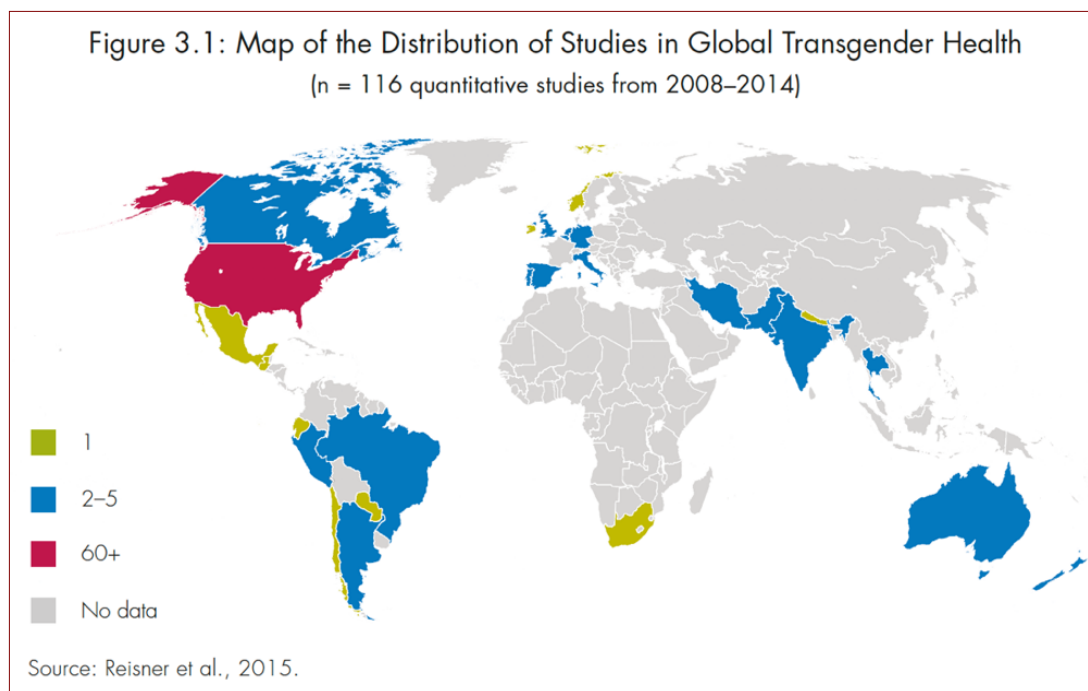


Figure 1: Map showing the distribution of research on Global Transgender Health

Thus, this research was conducted to fill the research gap by examining the key communication factors that influence transgender persons to decide to utilize gender reassignment surgical services in Thailand.

## Literature Review

Regarding previous studies, decision making is the toughest issue among the transgender community considering gender reassignment surgery. For the purposes of this study, gender reassignment surgery includes procedures such as breast augmentation for a transwoman, breast reduction for a transman as well as facial reconstruction or surgery on other organs of the face and/or body to make the body and face appear more like the transitioned gender (Asia Pacific Transgender Network, 2015). Philip Kotler (2003) explained that consumer behavior is divided into five stages: 1) Need Arousal or Problem Recognition, 2) Information Search, 3) Evaluation of Alternatives, 4) Purchase Decision and 5) Post Purchase Behavior. For example, people suffering from gender dysphoria start with the need to undergo sex-change surgery and other procedures might also be required surgical intervention. From there, they will search for available information to evaluate and make their decision to choose the most suitable place to receive the service. After completion of the surgical processes, they can reflect on the decision and evaluate its worthiness. The step of evaluation of alternatives and making the decision are complex and influenced by the notions such as quality, cost, and speed of the service, and other factors.

When it comes to evaluation of service alternatives, Kapil Jekishan (2017) introduced the notion of, Good, Cheap, Fast, but You Can Pick Only Two. When faced with service quality, cheap service price, and fast service, consumers are likely to choose two: 1) Good and Cheap, Won't be Fast, 2) Fast and Good, Won't be Cheap, 3) Fast and Cheap, Won't be Good. Whatever the case, consumers usually give the greatest importance to quality. If service providers say that quality will be decreased when a consumer chooses speed and low price,

consumers will focus on quality first (Jekishan, 2017). However, due to the fact that the overall costs for gender reassignment surgery is quite high compared to consumers' cost of living, price becomes a major factor in decision making even though quality of the services is the most important.

Piyaluk Potiwan's 2011 doctoral thesis, *Social Movement of the Transgender*, indicates that one of the driving forces behind transgender persons is socio-economic status among transgender persons. Differing access to financial resources leads to discriminant problems for transgender persons who have undergone gender reassignment surgery and those who have not had the opportunity to do so. This research provides a basis for analyzing the links between social contexts and gender reassignment surgery, particularly socio-economic status, which can be a major factor that can affect the selection of gender reassignment surgery. This may turn out to be a positive situation for Thailand, which as noted by Jitlada Maneerat (2010) is advantageously situated for medical tourism as the cost for cosmetic surgery is much more economical compared to Western countries. Individuals interested in these services can travel to Thailand easily. The country has advanced medical equipment and a wide selection of tourist destinations. Maneerat argues that Thailand is suitable to become a hub with the quality, reasonable cost, and convenience. However, notes that advertising remains a weak point (Maneerat, 2010).

Thailand's advertising and promotion are inferior to those of neighboring countries such as South Korea, and the Thai Medical Council's code of ethics sets restrictions on advertising as physicians are not allowed to produce advertising similar to that of other products (Maneerat, 2010). The research points out that the development of marketing communication management for the cosmetic surgery service industry is needed. A major weakness is a lack of marketing communication to attract and persuade target consumers in the step of searching for information that connects to alternative evaluation and purchase intention.

After evaluating alternatives, the consumer will determine their purchase intention for the service. There can then be other factors that could affect their purchase such as social factors such as others in their social group not accepting their decision. There could also be anticipated situational factors, for instance, the consumer loses their job or a user they know tells them the service is not good. Any of these can affect the final purchase decision (Kotler, 2003). For this case, undergoing a major surgery requires strong physical and mental health, as well as encouragement. Research conducted by Nuntaya Kongprapun (2016) with transwomen noted quality of life to be important factors related to gender reassignment. Transwomen focused on four areas of quality of life: 1) Physical Conditions: they would be physically weak due to a lack of exercise and rest as well as long-term hormone treatments, 2) Mental Conditions: they would feel disappointed and worry about their family and profession, and face both health and personal problems, 3) Social Relationships: they would not be accepted or given the same opportunities by society and could not be themselves and 4) Environment: they would face economic hardship and live in poor conditions. Their family would not accept them as a transgender. These research results can be applied in the analysis of the links between social contexts and gender reassignment surgery, particularly the physical and mental health issues transgender persons face and their inability to receive gender reassignment surgery.

These above concepts and related research have been applied in the assessment and analysis of service buying decision processes. This study builds on the previous research to investigate the communication factors influencing transgender persons' decision to utilize gender reassignment surgical services in Thailand.

## Research Methodology

The methodology consists of two parts: 1) Quantitative research and 2) Qualitative research. Each method is explained in detail as follows:

The quantitative approach employed a survey research method in which a close-ended questionnaire was distributed through a website, <http://www.cmcgrst.com>, to enable online data collection. The questionnaire was also distributed as a hard copy among transwomen and transmen interested in gender reassignment surgery, both Thai and foreign. An initial sample of 400 participants was targeted, with a total of 530 respondents submitting questionnaires.

The qualitative approach employed a semi-structured in-depth interview format with the design of open-ended questions. The sample included 20 transgender persons interested in gender reassignment surgery for transwomen and transmen, both Thai and foreign. Finally, 16 transwomen and four transmen from Thailand, Japan, the U.S.A. and Spain participated in the research.

For the data analysis, the coding in the quantitative part was uploaded to the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) program to acquire statistical results, such as frequency distribution and percentage. The recordings of the in-depth interviews were first transcribed and then checked. The qualitative research findings were then inserted with the quantitative research findings under the same topic headings. The results were next written as a descriptive report after which they were summarized, analyzed, and discussed based on the related concepts and research objective.

## Results and Discussion

Results provided insights into the decision making for the transgender community considering undergo the surgery in Thailand. Specifically, we noted that the evaluation of alternatives is the third phase in the service buying decision process during which service users apply the following factors: 1) the skill of surgeons, 2) service fees and 3) supplementary service quality respectively. It should be noted that during the information gathering process, information about physicians and surgeons is less available to service users due to restrictions on advertising while it remains the most important information in their evaluation of alternatives and decision making. Factors affecting service users' evaluation of alternatives to decide on whether to undergo gender reassignment can be analyzed using the concept of Good, Cheap, Fast, but You Can Pick Only Two by Kapil Jekishan (2017). The three factors considered while evaluating service are: 1) quality, 2) price and 3) speed, but a customer can only choose two of these. Therefore, quality and efficiency of surgical service are the most significant concerns of a potential service user rather than costs and surgical procedures.

When a potential service user is considering gender reassignment surgery and health services, if money is not a concern, they will choose to receive services from the most famous and skilled surgeon, even if the cost of surgery is higher. Supplementary services are another influential factor that will build a positive impression. If the service user has a limited budget, they will first consider price and then choose a physician, or surgeon, with the best reputation and skill they can afford. Thus, if the service user has substantial capital, they will select a private sanatorium where the charges will be high. If their capital is limited, they will choose a government sanatorium, where the waiting queue can be quite long as is presented in figure 2.

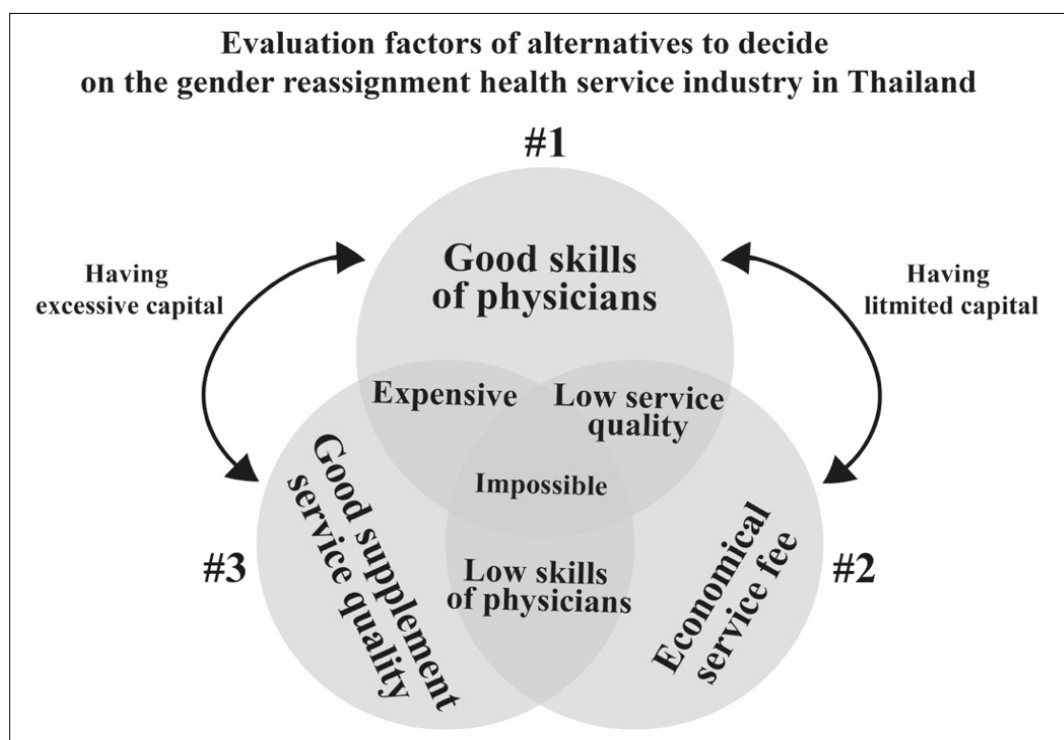


Figure 2: Evaluation factors of alternatives to decide on the gender reassignment health service industry in Thailand

Decision making to undergo surgery is the fourth stage in the service buying decision process. Service users who participated in this research and who had already undergone gender reassignment surgery in Thailand made up the largest group of participants, followed by those who had decided to have the surgery in Thailand, after which came those still uncertain and, finally, those who decided not to have the surgery in Thailand. The percentages are presented in Figure 3.

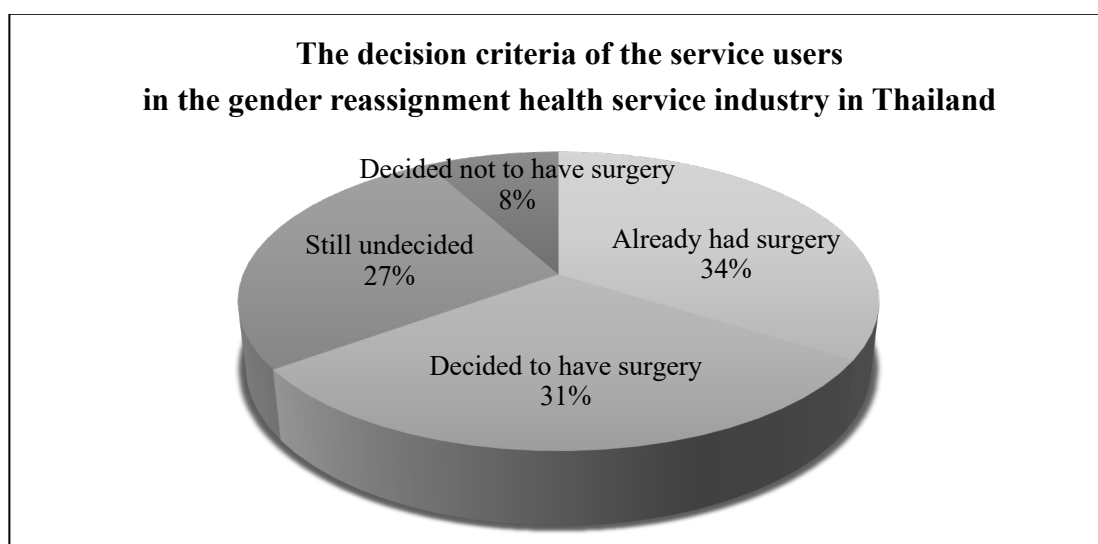


Figure 3: The decision criteria of the service users in the gender reassignment health service industry in Thailand

The first reasons why service users will choose to undergo gender reassignment surgery in Thailand is that Thailand has expert physicians and surgeons as well as modern medical equipment and instruments; second is that the costs for the surgery and health services in Thailand are economical and third is that Thailand is a convenient location to visit, which is in agreement with the research of Jitlada Maneerat (2010) who found that Thailand's image includes its high potential for medical tourism. The cost of cosmetic surgery is also much more reasonable in Thailand when compared to countries in the West. Furthermore, it is convenient to travel to and from Thailand, and the country has advanced medical equipment and technology.

On the other hand, the first reason that causes service users to feel uncertain about undergoing gender reassignment procedures in Thailand is insufficient capital. This is in agreement with the research of Piyaluk Potiwan (2011), who found that the roots of problems faced by transgender persons are economic and social. There is a tendency to encounter class division, similar to discrimination, between those who can undergo gender reassignment and those who are unable to.

The next influential factor is that individuals feel there is insufficient information to make a decision. Jitlada Maneerat (2010) similarly found that the Medical Code of Ethics of the Thai Medical Council set limits on advertising, which did not allow physicians or sanatoriums to advertise their services. The third reason is health limitations, which are in agreement with the research of Nuntaya Kongraphun (2016), who found that transwomen face problems in their quality of life as they suffer from chronic illness or are weak physically due to hard work or long-term hormone treatments.

This research notably revealed that when a service user does decide to undergo surgery with a specific surgeon, they will make an appointment to consult them and plan their surgery at a sanatorium. Others associated with a service user's decision making include physicians, family members, partners, and close transgender friends, with physicians being the most influential. Philip Kotler (2003) also notes the above-mentioned factors when considering: 1) social factors, in this case surgery, based on the opinions and agreement of family members, a partner and friends of the service user and 2) anticipated situation factors, i.e., the requirement of physical strength and good health to undergo gender reassignment surgery as the most important concerns. The selected physician or surgeon will then be responsible for informing the service user of potential risks or side effects that can occur from surgery or treatments. If a surgeon feels the service user is a good candidate for surgery and they are willing to take the risk, there is a high probability the service user will decide to undergo surgery. If the surgeon feels that the surgery is unwise because of serious dangers and refuses to proceed, the service user will feel unable to disregard the physician's opinion, even with family, partner and friends' support for this endeavor. Therefore, the physician does have the greatest influence in such cases.

## **Conclusion**

Since 2002, the Thai government has promoted a policy of making Thailand the health center for Asia (Bureau of Sanatorium and Art of Healing, 2009). The gender reassignment health service industry falls under the medical services business sector of Thailand, and this policy provides opportunities to advance with its potential, particularly with the growing acceptance of transsexuals. The Thai Medical Council also enacted regulations and a code of conduct for such professional transgender medical treatment in 2009 to prepare for future expansion

(“Cosmetic surgery grows,” 2012). There are several aspects that are further needed to be addressed and clarified in the gender reassignment service communication in order to affirm transgenders’ confidence in decision making for undergoing the gender reassignment surgery process in Thailand.

First, to promote the gender reassignment surgical service in Thailand among international transgenders, service providers are recommended to disseminate all comprehensive information, including content that provides medical information and facts as well as information about their sanatorium, physicians and surgeons. Second, when it comes to content concerning physicians and surgeons, it is better to focus more on academic information that service users can access easily to build trust, or faith, in their surgeons, for example, attractive pictures of the results of surgery they conducted with explanations of the techniques employed. Presenting the results of physicians’ research would also be highly appreciated and could therefore encourage potential service users’ decisions. Third, featuring reasonable prices would reduce concerns about service fees as this would help to build a strong brand image for Thailand as the major destination for gender reassignment surgical services alongside its already well-established national image as a tourist paradise. Finally, not only are transgender persons, those with direct experience and well-known influencers related to gender reassignment surgery, vital for marketing communication, but so too are Thai physicians and surgeons who can best answer questions and therefore build trust.

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