

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF SERVICE LOYALTY IN HEALTHCARE: LINKAGES BETWEEN SERVICE PROVIDERS' JOB SATISFACTION AND OTHER ANTECEDENTS LEADING TO PATIENTS' LOYALTY

Jobin Sahadevan¹, Ajimon George*²

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Government Arts and Science College, Santhanpara, Kerala, India

² Associate Professor & Research Guide, Marian College, Kuttikkanam (Autonomous), Kerala, India

Abstract: This paper proposes a conceptual model using the predictors of service loyalty in the context of health care for establishing a linkage between service provider's job satisfaction and other antecedents of patients' loyalty. There is lot of research which examine the effect of service quality on patients' satisfaction as well as patients' loyalty. However there is limited research on the impact of service provider's job satisfaction on patient satisfaction and patient loyalty. Ensuring high level of customer satisfaction and retaining long-term relationships with them has become essential for survival amongst competitive service providers. This framework also integrates the impact of switching cost and relationship quality on patient loyalty. One may stay with the same service provider because of high switching cost. However, few studies have attempted to integrate all these relevant factors in a single model of predictors of patients' loyalty. This framework helps the hospital managers to understand the predictors of post purchase behaviour of patients. By understanding the link between job satisfaction level of service providers (physicians, nurses, pharmacists and technical staff) and its impact on satisfaction and loyalty behaviour of patients, they will be able to take measures to improve factors causing customer retention.

Keywords - Job Satisfaction, Service Quality, Patient Satisfaction, Switching Cost, Relationship Quality, Patient Loyalty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Healthcare is an integral part of life and people always demand a better quality of health to maintain a healthy life. After globalization developing countries have been witnessing increasing demand for quality healthcare. In order to

have a competitive advantage in this highly competitive environment the hospitals should improve their quality standards. Both marketing academics and professionals have attempted to uncover the most prominent antecedents of customer (patient) loyalty. But, it lacks an integrated framework for establishing linkage between the perspectives of different stakeholders especially in the context of healthcare. Customer loyalty has currently become one of the greatest concerns to researchers in the service marketing context (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). Achieving and maintaining current customer loyalty emerges as an important marketing strategy due to the economic advantages of retaining existing customers as against searching for prospective customers. Various researchers focused their studies to explain the antecedents or predictors of the successful effort to retain the existing customers (Cronin et al., 2000; Liao and Chuang, 2004). It should be regarded as a long term-term investment for the service providers. It is also important that, in order to develop strong loyal customer base, service providers should develop and retain good relationships with their customers.

According to previous service marketing researchers (Berry, 1981; Lings and Greenley, 2005; Gounaris et al. 2010), a major antecedent that affects the quality service performance as well as the satisfaction and loyalty behaviour is employee job satisfaction. This is because; unless employees are happy with their job they will not be willing to take the maximum effort, to deliver quality service in accordance with the customer's best interest in their heart and mind. First-line employee job satisfaction is clearly one of the parameters that influence the service and the retention behaviour of service customers. The term service satisfaction discussed in this paper includes the job satisfaction of physicians, nurses, pharmacists and the technical

staff who deliver service to patients'. The behaviour and the satisfaction level of direct contact employees such as physicians, nurses, pharmacists and the technical staff are important because: they are the real providers who deliver the service to customers (Schneider et al. 1997), they will communicate the values of the organization, and they communicate feedback of the service experience to the management for quality improvement (Little and Dean, 2006). Direct service providers performance represents the intangible component of the customer's perception of service quality which influences customer relationships and loyalty behaviour (Dimitriades, 2007).

From the existing literature it is clearly understood that most empirical studies were conducted by collecting data without incorporating both employee and customer perspectives in a single framework for examining the various parameters that affect customers' perception and subsequent behaviour (Zeithaml, 2000). Having identified this gap in the extant literature, we develop and propose an integrated framework in the context of healthcare in order to investigate how employee job satisfaction affects service quality, patient satisfaction, and ultimately loyalty behaviour of patients. We also incorporate the impact of switching cost and relationship quality as predictors of patient loyalty behaviour because relationship quality is an emerging important construct in service marketing literature and has become a strategic tool for customer retention since a good relationship is empirically verified with loyalty creation (Moliner et al. 2007). Some empirical studies recently verified that satisfaction may not be the sole reason for creating customer loyalty. Dissatisfied customers may also stay with the same service providers because of high switching cost. This is a service marketing strategy to create artificial loyalty by increasing the switching cost as well as other barriers of changing the service provider. So it is essential to investigate the role of switching cost as a predictor of customer loyalty.

To the best of our knowledge no research has proposed such a research model and empirically investigated these constructs in a single framework. George and Sahadevan (2019) developed a model to predict the patients' loyalty in health care sector, but it does not incorporated service providers' perspective. Therefore, the objective of this study is to develop a conceptual model by establishing a linkage among service providers' job satisfaction,

relationship quality and switching costs on customer loyalty in the context of healthcare. Understanding the role of service providers' job satisfaction on patient satisfaction and how relationship quality and switching costs relate to customer loyalty can assist service providers to monitor and enhance customer loyalty effectively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND MODEL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 JOB SATISFACTION, SERVICE QUALITY AND PATIENT SATISFACTION

According to Herzberg's motivation – hygiene theory job satisfaction is a function of satisfaction with the various elements of job (Herzberg and Mausner, 1959). Gruneberg, 1976 defined job satisfaction as all feelings that an individual has about his job. Another view is that, job satisfaction is an affective orientation that an employee has towards his or her work (Price, 2001). Previous research in service marketing has shown that the job satisfaction level of front line employee is a relevant factor in service quality improvement and better performance. Employees who feel satisfied with their jobs will be willing to provide higher levels of quality and ensure high customer satisfaction and create loyal customers to the firm. Bitner (1990) stated that, in the service encounter, employees are the real performers rather than simply workers, and their behavioural performance is the service quality that customers perceive. Service quality as perceived by customers is one of the most important nonfinancial performance measures to examine in a service organization and describes as antecedents of both satisfaction and loyalty. Previous research suggests that specific job satisfaction measures should be used to measure specific behaviour (Ironson et al. 1989). However, previous research on service quality clearly indicates that global job satisfaction has a positive influence on service quality (Yoon et al., 2001; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Schlesinger and Zornitsky, 1991).

Analysis of the specific effects of different job satisfaction facets (e.g., satisfaction with pay, satisfaction with supervision, satisfaction with working conditions, etc.) gives a clear picture with regards to the role of job satisfaction as an antecedent of quality, satisfaction and loyalty framework. Previous studies have found a significant and positive relationship between job satisfaction and service quality (Hartline and Ferrell,

1996; Schneider and Bowen, 1985). To date, there are very few studies of the job satisfaction–service quality–satisfaction linkage at the individual employee level of analysis. In a service organization, it is possible that employee job satisfaction may have its biggest impact in the area of customer satisfaction and revisit intentions. Studies have shown that job satisfaction is positively related to employee perceptions of service quality (Schlesinger and Zornitsky, 1991) and customer ratings of service quality (Yoon et al. 2001). This concept is based on the service–profit–chain theory developed by Heskett et al. (1994), which suggests that the firm’s overall especially financial performance is derived from customer satisfaction, which is derived from employee performance, which, in turn, is derived from employee satisfaction.

Many scholars in the past have emphasised that the provision of high quality service to external customers should be preceded by satisfying the needs of a firm’s internal customers, its employees (Benoy, 1996; Hallowell et al. 1996; Johnson, 1996; O’Connor and Shewchuk, 1995; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1997). Previous studies have also found job satisfaction to be one of the critical factors affecting customer satisfaction (Hoffman and Ingram, 1991). Hallowell et al. (1996) asserted that any firm seeking differentiation through customer service must first achieve high internal service quality. Also, they reported that organisational traits such as a common goal, support and assistance from superiors, and reward and recognition were highly correlated with employee satisfaction. In another study conducted by Little and Dean (2006) dealing with the relationship between job satisfaction and service quality, concluded that an employee’s perception of job satisfaction and service capability had a significant correlation with their perception of service quality, and it was an important antecedent to job satisfaction. From the above observation it is hypothesised as:

H1: Job satisfaction has a positive effect on Service quality.

H2: Job satisfaction has a positive effect on Patient satisfaction

H3: Service Quality mediates the relationship between Job satisfaction and Patient satisfaction.

2.2 RELATIONSHIP QUALITY, PATIENT SATISFACTION, AND PATIENT LOYALTY

Relationship quality refers to “an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship and the extent to which it meets the needs and expectations of the parties based on a history of successful or unsuccessful encounters or events” (Crosby et al. 1990). A good relationship quality implies high patient satisfaction with trust in a hospital or its medical staff (Weng et al. 2006). This model defines relationship quality as a high order construct composed of trust and commitment. The production and consumption of service happen simultaneously, and hence human interaction and building up of trust and commitment are essential for retaining customers. In the case of a service business, the role of trust becomes more important due to the intangible characteristics of service business (Berry, 1995). Trust and commitment are considered as two key dimensions of relationship quality that play a central role in building and maintaining successful relationships (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Prior research shows that trust is directly and positively related to behavioural intentions (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Similar to trust, commitment has a direct positive influence on behavioural intentions. That is, the customer with greater levels of commitment is inclined to remain in the relationship (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Morgan and Hunt (1994) also developed the key mediating variable model of relationship marketing using the commitment-trust theory. Trust and commitment are also recognized as potential mediators of the effects of service evaluation factors on customer loyalty.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that trust positively influences customer loyalty in many contexts (e.g. Chiu et al. 2009; Ganesan, 1994; Liu et al. 2005). The most recent literature agrees in identifying the components of relationship quality. These are the satisfaction of the consumer, trust in the supplier, and commitment (Baker et al. 1999; Crosby et al. 1990; Dorsch et al. 1998; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Palmer and Bejou, 1994). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994) trust and commitment are crucial because they lead directly to co-operative behaviours that are conducive to relationship marketing success.

Prior research shows that trust is directly and positively related to behavioural intentions as

well as self-reported behaviours (Chaludhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Similar to trust, commitment has a direct positive influence on behavioural intentions. That is, the customer with greater levels of commitment is inclined to remain in the relationship (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). From the above observation it is hypothesised that:

H4: Patient Satisfaction positively affects Trust

H5: Trust positively affects patient loyalty

H6: Trust Mediates the Relationship between Patient satisfaction and Patient Loyalty

H7: Patient Satisfaction positively affects Commitment

H8: Commitment positively affects patient loyalty

H9: Commitment Mediates the Relationship between Patient satisfaction and Patient Loyalty

2.3. SWITCHING COST, PATIENT SATISFACTION, AND PATIENT LOYALTY

Switching costs are frequently defined as “the perceived economic and psychological costs associated with changing from one alternative to another” (Jones et al. 2002). In simple terms, switching cost is the cost or expense associated with change of a service provider. Switching costs refer to the loss that customers incur when they decide to change suppliers. Especially, in relation to customer satisfaction and service quality, these potential losses can make customer stay loyal even when they are temporary, not satisfied with the products or services before companies take some recovery actions (Chen and Wang, 2009; Stan, 2015; Kapoor, 2009)

Recently, researchers have found that customer satisfaction is insufficient to make loyal customers (Kapoor, 2009). Earlier studies were mainly focused on the impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. But now we need to look beyond customer satisfaction. Hence, it is necessary to examine the nature of the satisfaction - loyalty relationship to explore more factors influencing the link between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Service literature shows that a few studies have been conducted to analyze the moderating as well as the direct impact of switching cost and relationship quality on customer satisfaction. The prime propose of creating loyal customers can be achieved by following two primary approaches: making customer satisfied and raising switching

costs. Empirical studies about the moderating role of switching costs on the satisfaction-repurchase behaviour or customer loyalty relationship are inconclusive (Nagengast et al. 2014). Indeed, several studies showed positive moderating effects (Pettersson, 2004; Yang and Peterson, 2004), other find negative moderating effects (Jones et al. 2000; Peterson and Smith, 2003; Stan et al. 2013) or no significant moderating effect (Burnham et al. 2003; Lam et al. 2004) of switching costs on the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty.

As mentioned earlier, in order to transform satisfaction to loyalty, other factors need to be included in this linkage. For this purpose, switching cost is usually viewed as a moderator in the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Chen and Wang, 2009; Pick and Eisend, 2014). In marketing literature, increasing switching costs is the way to make customer loyal besides increasing customer satisfaction (Kotler, 1997). The moderating effects of switching costs on the satisfaction-loyalty linkage depend on the nature of market competition (Jones and Sasser, 1995).

Because of this supplemental role, switching costs are usually considered as moderators for satisfaction-loyalty and service value - loyalty linkages. In addition to the moderating role, switching costs can also be referred as an independent construct having a direct impact on the level of loyalty. Therefore, switching costs are assumed to have both moderating effects on customer satisfaction – loyalty relationship as well as a direct impact on loyalty behaviour of patient in the healthcare sector. Given this, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H10: Switching cost positively affects patient loyalty

H11: switching cost moderates relationship between patient satisfaction and patient loyalty.

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Based on the discussion made in this paper and the stated objectives, a conceptual model (as shown in Figure 1) is proposed to exhibit the predictors of patient loyalty. A strong linkage has been observed from the literature among service providers' Job satisfaction, Service quality and Patient satisfaction. The model also incorporated

Relationship quality (as a combination of trust and commitment) and switching cost as a direct as well as moderating construct.

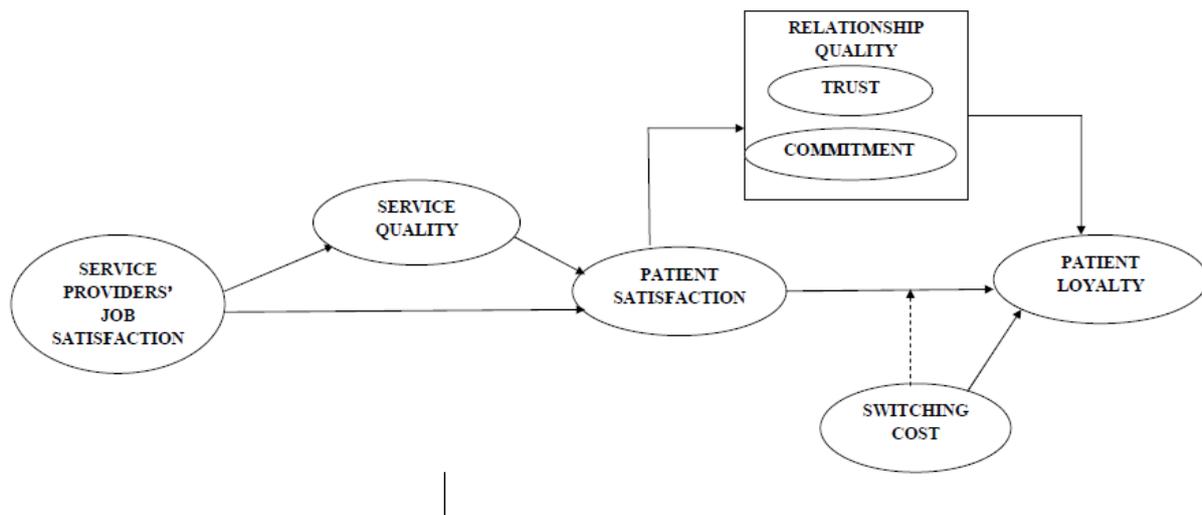


Figure 1: Conceptual model to predict patients' loyalty

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The outcome of this paper is a conceptualization (provided in Figure 1) supported by research propositions based on the available literature. The review of literature also underpins the importance of retaining existing customers because it provides many benefits to the service providers. This article contributes to the existing literature a hypothesized model that permits the examination of consumer behavioural procedures regarding job satisfaction, service quality, relationship quality, trust, commitment, switching cost, patient satisfaction, and patient loyalty. Exploring these processes through empirical studies in future will help in gaining new insights which might help the hospital managers to retain existing customers and to attract new customers. To put it succinctly, the model presented in this article can be used to propagate empirical research to augment healthcare marketing literature. Examining the antecedents of patients' loyalty will contribute to the theory by broadening consumer buying behaviour research.

Till today, few studies in the developing nations were conducted to understand the types of relationship that exists between service providers' perspective and patients' perspective. A big chunk of the studies have been done in developed countries, the findings of which cannot be generalized to Indian context. It has been contended that constructs of service quality and other

antecedents that are developed in one culture might not be applicable in another culture. Therefore, it is felt imperative to go deeper into the subject matter, thereby, identifying the dimensions and relationship that exists between the antecedents, service providers' job satisfaction, service quality, patient satisfaction and patient loyalty with health care services in the context of a developing country.

Patient loyalty has gained immense importance in healthcare service sector in India because of the drastic changes that have taken place in healthcare market in last two decades. The healthcare market place is characterized by intense competition and specialization today. The market share of private hospitals, specifically in cities has gone up multi –fold during this period. This has forced private hospitals to compete with each other to gain as much as market shares as possible. In the context of healthcare service, loyalty is considered to be a success factor. So it is important to examine the factors that influence patient loyalty. In this context, this paper provides theoretical contribution by developing a patient loyalty model which helps the service providers to manage patient loyalty effectively.

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