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ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF PATIENT EXPERIENCE AND THE HOSPITAL 'IMAGE' ON PATIENT SATISFACTION AND PATIENT LOYALTY IN HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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Abstract

The global healthcare sector is widely recognized as one of the most dynamic and innovative industries, experiencing rapid evolution and growth within the global economy. Similar products or services targeting a specific patient demographic foster a competitive environment across various industries, including the healthcare sector. The industry's primary focus is on providing medical services to individuals seeking healthcare. The research objectives for the current study are to assess service quality, commitment, switching costs, and available alternatives that influence patient experience in healthcare organizations in the UAE, and to determine the relationship between patient experience and hospital image in relation to patient satisfaction in these organizations. The researcher recommends testing the influence of service quality, commitment, switching costs, and available alternatives on patient experience in healthcare organizations in the UAE, either qualitatively or quantitatively. The researcher also recommends testing the relationship between patient experience, hospital image, and patient satisfaction, as well as patient loyalty, in healthcare organizations in the UAE. Focusing on quality healthcare, trust, and a good reputation enables hospitals to retain patients and reduce the likelihood of patients switching to other organizations, thus improving the chances of long-term viability in a competitive healthcare market. These aspects, in turn, lead to positive health results and strengthen the UAE’s vision of providing exemplary healthcare services to the world.

Keywords: Patient Experience, Hospital Image, Patient Satisfaction, Patient Loyalty

Introduction:

The world’s healthcare industry is one of the most dynamic sectors of the modern economy. In this industry, both public and private organizations serve the same patients, making it a fiercely competitive environment. All these service providers strive to achieve patient satisfaction as it determines profitability and sustainability. In recent years, patients as customers has become more pronounced, especially in private care where customer satisfaction translates directly into revenue. Unsatisfied customers can easily switch to other providers, which makes user satisfaction crucial for the business (Wulandari et al., 2023).

Patients' involvement with a healthcare system can be evaluated based on engagement, loyalty, and overall value for these services, among a multitude of factors (Ferreira et al., 2023). Loyalty is defined as a continuous commitment to certain services, and in the case of healthcare services, devoted patronage stems from familiarity and emotional association with the provider (Wulandari et al., 2023). It also encompasses both attitudes and actions, which together form the basis of the loyalty approach model for forecasting future user behavior (Shamsudin et al., 2015).

Unlike other industries where people can choose to put off using a service at their convenience, all patients have no such luxury when it comes to receiving healthcare services, making this sector different. Due to the urgency and importance placed on medical care, the drivers of loyalty within healthcare differ (Sertan et al., 2023). Studies suggest that commitment, switching costs, satisfaction, image, and other factors have a considerable positive influence on patient loyalty (Shamsudin et al., 2015).

Consumers of modern healthcare are more proactive and informed than in the past. Patients expect not only treatment but also care, which is remarkable, gentle, and reliable. Patients are now much more scrutinizing of services offered due to an increase in expectations (Ndubisi, 2014; Ferreira et al., 2023). Providers need to recognize this shift in paradigm and focus on delivering a quality experience, as providing quality health experiences is both an ethical necessity and a competitive imperative (Ali et al., 2023).

In seeking a competitive advantage, patient relationship management (PRM), along with relationship marketing, is being widely adopted by healthcare organizations, along with strategic frameworks. Although PRM attempts to improve interaction between patients and providers, it has not been effective in enhancing patient satisfaction or loyalty (Toni, Jithina, & Thomas, 2022). These factors, along with the ever-changing business environment and multifaceted patient expectations, have necessitated the adoption of more proactive approaches, such as PEM (Sertan et al., 2023).

Patient satisfaction enhances the predictability of future behavior, including post-evaluation processes regarding service use (Cascella et al., 2022). Such attentive value-adding relationships that are adaptable and responsive build intense provider-patient engagements over time, resulting in greater relationship equity (Ndubisi, 2014). Patient loyalty is further enhanced when they exhibit attitudinal commitment, which involves repetitive engagement with a provider and active resistance to switching, regardless of competing offers (Toni, Jithina, & Thomas, 2022).

As indicated by Ndubisi (2014), loyal patients have three fundamental dimensions: attitudinal loyalty, emotional attachment, and behavioral loyalty, characterized by repeated usage and a reluctance to switch providers. A more severe form of this loyalty is "brand insistence," which describes patients who only seek specific providers and will not consider any alternative options (Rhoden, Bonilha, & Harvey, 2022).

Literature Review:

Loyalty and Its Dimensions

As outlined by Singh et al. (2023), loyalty was previously characterized as faithfulness to a country, an organization, or a particular cause. It has since evolved to encompass the business and marketing industries, where it involves a customer’s willingness to remain loyal to the brand, recommend it to others, and form emotional bonds beyond mere transactions (Oliver, 1999). Furthermore, Oliver (1999) argues that customer loyalty also implies feelings of affection towards the organization, alongside ongoing support for the brand.

A consumer actively displays loyalty if they commit to repeat purchases, regardless of external factors that may influence them to switch to another brand (Ndubisi, 2014). If associated with services, loyalty represents a specific type of attitude and a perpetual bond formed through the acceptance of service conditions and long-term collaboration (Syahril et al., 2022). Meesala and Paul (2018) pinpoint the characteristics of loyal customers as those who are highly attuned to the institution, who do not easily entertain competing offers due to their prior commitments. Ferreira et al. (2023) also note that emotional experiences, combined with strong sentiments, lead to a heightened awareness of the value an organization can offer, which is why customers tend to become loyal.

As Sethi (2021) observes, loyalty may be interpreted as a form of psychological attachment toward a product, service, or organization. Loyalty is also defined by Shamsudin et al. (2015) as when customers perceive the product or service as their top-of-mind choice during the purchasing consideration process. This preference arises from the way the offering aligns with their values and needs.

The scope of loyalty extends far beyond commercial markets; it is critically important within the context of healthcare. Sari (2018) defines patient loyalty as the repeat utilization of healthcare services following satisfactory results. Rohmati and Setiyadi (2020) elaborate that patient loyalty refers to a commitment to select the same provider repeatedly over time. Hospitals place great value on loyal patients because it is less expensive to keep patients than to obtain new ones (Griffin, 2017). Continuity is beneficial for both patients and healthcare providers (Gunawan, 2018).

Griffin (2017) characterizes loyalty as stable, non-random purchasing behavior over an extended period, while Mandira et al. (2018) interpret it as a strong propensity to repurchase regardless of external factors. Antukay et al. (2022) link satisfaction post-service usage to loyalty. Lakew (2022) notes that the physical and psychological responses of patients to treatment and interactions with doctors largely shape their loyalty to healthcare. Pauli et al. (2023) emphasize that trust must be upheld throughout the patient's emotional and sensory experience during service encounters.

Loyalty is regarded as a key goal for any business. It forms an emotional tie between clients with the personnel, products, or services offered by the company as described by Woldemeskel (2017). Its importance stems from its ability to improve profitability due to repeat purchase patterns, premium price acceptance, and increased word-of-mouth advertising for the brand. A loyal client is defined by Asnawi et al. (2020) as someone who relies on one organization for most or all of their needs continuously over time. Cascella et al. (2022) and Negassa and Japee (2023) have recently recognized loyalty as multidimensional, encompassing price tolerance, complaint management, word-of-mouth activity, and resistance to switching to other businesses.

Customer loyalty is often a direct outcome of emotional satisfaction and a feeling that the customer is valued. Institutions with strong ethical reputations typically achieve higher loyalty levels. Furthermore, service excellence strengthens this relationship exceptionally if it exceeds the expected level of service and is offered at reasonable prices (Oliver, 1999). Cascella et al. (2022) noted that loyalty-oriented marketing focuses on nurturing retained patronage, which caters to evolving customer perceptions as a key component of intelligent customer-centric strategies. Initially, Loyalty concepts were rooted in physical product market-based brand allegiance, but have now broadened into service-based companies that provide ephemeral encounters (Sertan et al., 2023).

Loyalty is defined in terms of two components: behavioral and attitudinal. Behavioral refers to the repurchase activity, while attitudinal speaks to emotional connection with some form of intention towards preserving it (Sertan et al., 2023). As emphasized by Tarokh and Esmaeili Gookeh (2019), genuine acumen integrates not just repeated behavior but a mental bond with an enduring tie. Combining these dimensions also aids in addressing inertia-driven brand reliance, categorized as loyal due to routine versus deliberate, sustained engagement, which is rigorously anchored in steadfast devotion, as described by Lakew (2022). Genuine commitment requires both positive disposition as well as action, according to Sethi (2019)

Wulandari et al. (2023) define customer loyalty as a positive consumer sentiment that leads to repeat purchases. Many scholars support the bi-dimensional framework, incorporating both behavioral intention and some form of emotional or cognitive relating. This duality is important in the consideration of healthcare, where patients' repeated participation is closely connected to trust, satisfaction, and emotional safety.

As highlighted above, loyalty, regardless of its context in business or healthcare services, is not simply defined by the frequency of transactions. Instead, it demonstrates profound emotional and psychological connections that have developed through positive interactions over time, trust, and value ascribed by the entity offering the products or services.

Ndubisi (2014) summarizes customer loyalty into three major dimensions: attitudinal loyalty, which is where customers receive or believe something positive about a product or service; behavioral loyalty, which shows repeated purchases; and switching restraint, whereby consumers do not change brands because there are barriers that exist, or due to some form of loyalty they possess. Ferreira et al. (2023) further develop this concept with brand insistence as a more intensive form of loyalty, where consumers strongly prefer one brand and neglect other options entirely.

There exist older works, such as those by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Toni et al. (2023), which also make the distinction between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Loyal customers, in terms of their attitude, have emotional bonds and sentiments, such as commitment and trust. In contrast, behaviorally loyal customers engage in purchase activities, including buying, as well as several customer behaviors, including repurchase and referrals through word-of-mouth.

Caber and Albayrak (2018). Hizam and Ahmed (2020), as well as Jou and Day (2021), also emphasize this two-dimensional view towards understanding loyalty. As noted by these authors, attitudinal loyalty is associated with psychological attachment, whereas behavioral loyalty is demonstrated through consumer action decisions. Emotional commitment is vital in attitudinal loyalty, as it describes the intensity of the bond that exists between the consumer and the organization (Khan et al., 2020; Kethan & Basha, 2022; Aburayya et al., 2022).

AlSaleh (2019), Singh et al. (2022), and Aldaihani et al. (2023) suggest that both dimensions are pivotal to understanding a consumer's propensity to be loyal by examining brand-switching tendencies along with purchase frequency and spending amounts. Trisno and Berlianto (2022) cite the implementation of both dimensions as beneficial for many sectors, including hospitality, recreation, and retail (Pauli et al., 2023).

Joy and Day (2021) propose adding cognitive loyalty as the third dimension in more recent studies. The model integrates three components: a behavioral component, which represents what consumers do; an attitudinal component, which represents their feelings; and a cognitive component, which represents their thoughts. Together, these create enduring customer commitment and interaction over time.

Companies now find themselves competing based on customer loyalty. According to Teshome (2018), loyal customers help reduce marketing expenditures while enhancing word-of-mouth advertising, which in turn boosts profitability. In healthcare, patient loyalty holds comparable value, as devoted patients encourage repeat visits and referrals, ultimately leading to improved revenue for hospitals (Rahmati, 2020). Research conducted by the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs found that retaining customers is five times cheaper than acquiring new ones (Ali et al., 2023).

As mentioned by Rhoden et al. (2022), some of the distinct advantages associated with loyalty include: enhanced rates of referrals and repeat purchases, greater levels of employee satisfaction, diminished pricing sensitivity, and a strong competitive moat. In addition, loyal customers help a company limit its knee-jerk reactions to shifting business conditions and firm operations during periods of intensified rivalry.

Customer Loyalty Programs and Their Benefits

The increased focus on retaining customers has led to the development of systematic schemes to foster customer loyalty. The rise of information technology creates opportunities for earning and retaining customers through monetary or relationship incentives (Wulandari et al., 2023).

Teshome (2018) classifies loyalty program advantages as functional, which include convenience and time-saving; economic, such as risk avoidance; and social, encompassing trust and relational bonds. These programs are not only beneficial from a consumer-satisfaction perspective but also strategically advantageous to the organization, helping reduce acquisition costs while increasing brand advocacy and profit margins.

Afridi et al. (2018) argue that these loyalty programs also serve the purpose of modeling consumer behavior, collecting customer data, and countering the strategies of competing businesses. Ismuroji et al. (2023) further reinforce that retaining existing customers is significantly less costly than acquiring new ones, a stance supported by previous research conducted by the U.S. government.

In conclusion, customer loyalty, as measured by behavior, attitude, or cognition, remains a multidimensional construct critical to business longevity. In addition, sustaining engagement in intensely contested environments helps omnichannel retailers hone operational efficiency while stimulating growth through targeted subsidization of various components within aided frameworks that galvanize interaction along multiple dimensions with participants who may provide costless value to monetized services through complex feedback loops, enhancing the value generated in an underutilized manner.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is universally regarded as an important factor in consumer behavior and business performance. Kotler and Armstrong (2008) highlighted the benefits of customer satisfaction, stating that satisfied customers are likely to repurchase and share positive experiences, while dissatisfied customers tend to spread negative feedback and make competitive switches (Moslehpour et al., 2023). Customer satisfaction refers to the perception of consumers, which relates to a company's ability to fulfill or surpass expectations. Customers experience satisfaction when they receive more than what was offered; however, if less is delivered, then dissatisfaction occurs (Wulandari et al., 2023).

Customer satisfaction encompasses the evaluation of both the quality of the purchased service and the usage of the product (Witiw et al., 2018). This has a direct impact on organizational performance and profitability (Alshourah, 2021). The concept of basic satisfaction stems from expectancy confirmation theory, which posits that alignment between expectations and performance yields confirmed expectations resulting in satisfaction, while nonalignment results in dissatisfaction (Alam et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2018). In many studies on customer satisfaction, it is common practice to use it as an independent variable to forecast the loyalty index for various brands or services offered (Moslehpour et al., 2022).

Ismuroji et al. (2023) consider satisfaction as a cumulative evaluation of product performance within the scope of customer wants. In contrast, Armstrong and Kotler (2009) claim that satisfaction occurs when either the business's perception of performance or delivery of services meets the market standard or exceeds expectations.

In Antukay et al. (2022), healthcare involves a behavioral and emotional aspect that relates to personal stress for patients. As they often seek stress relief from family or social networks during challenging times, this helps them emotionally connect with friends and relatives. These service encounters—interactions between customers and providers (Antukay et al., 2022) are critical in determining how satisfied customers are with a service. Therefore, examining patient satisfaction focuses on an area that is strategically vital for achieving a competitive advantage in the healthcare sector.

The treatment procedure involves satisfaction, defined as an outcome resulting from an assessment of service provided against a standard set either internally (within the services rendered) or externally (comparing it with that expected) by a given benchmark peer institution (Tjiptono et al, 2017; Dam & Dam, 2021). In addition to perceptions held regarding people's emotional reactions after receiving services, Tjiptono et al. (2017) note that complementing pleasant experiences with decreasing unpleasant ones increases satisfaction.

Satisfaction in primary care is influenced by patients' sociodemographic factors, such as their socioeconomic status, age, and health condition (Bowman et al., 1992). Assistive care, including emotional and physical aid, alongside honoring patient choice, is fundamental to supportive care (Khan et al., 2020). According to Ismuroji et al. (2023), patients express their attitudes toward care more clearly through qualitative means than through quantitative means, especially when it comes to nursing care.

Patient Experience

Marketing experience is an essential economic factor influenced by one's interactions with products and services (Ferreira et al., 2023). Experience from a behavioral lens is personal, emotional, and subjective (Shamsudin et al., 2015; Sari, 2018). Consumption has an emotional impact that is often contextually driven (Griffin, 2017).

Experience encompasses all the emotions, social, sensory, and cognitive that brand engagement evokes in a customer (Mandira et al., 2018). These are shaped by organizational logistics, such as price and variety, alongside external stimuli, including peer influence and the purpose of the purchase (Asnawi et al., 2020). Customer experience involves interactions that occur within customers' environments over time, through various stages or touchpoints (Negassa & Japee, 2023).

Khan et al. (2020) propose five dimensions of customer experience: relational, physical, sensory, cognitive, and affective, which occur before, during, and after purchase. In collaboration with other scholars, Moslehpour et al. (2022) provided a definition that focuses on both direct service encounters and indirect sources, such as reviews or advertisements: "experience is an inward response."

Experience results from the interactions, called touchpoints, where consumers connect with the company. Pauli et al. (2023) notent cela. Those experiences capture not only emotional engagement but also rational thinking, as well as physical participation and even spiritual involvement. Touches every level of the consumer. Ultimately, these touchpoints shape loyalty, as noted by Sethi (2019).

Meaningful touchpoints play a crucial role in delivering extraordinary experiences for an organization (Sethi, 2019; Lakew, 2022). Customer and organizational dimensions must be considered to assess experiences," stated Wulandari et al. (2023). Touchpoints serve as fundamental indicators for gauging the effectiveness of services rendered and the loyalty they engender (Sertan et al., 2023).

Service Quality

The importance of service quality permeates all levels within an organization as it fosters customer loyalty and sustained success (Toni et al., 2023). Customer retention often arises automatically with the attainment of high standards, which is frequently prompted by a heightened level of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

As cited in Jou and Day (2021), Kotler (2017) defines service quality as the delivery of services that fulfill community needs. Kotler (2017) offers a more traditional definition, focusing on the comparison between expectations and perceptions. Khan et al. (2020) provide a more holistic definition that includes components determining satisfaction and need fulfillment.

One of the most widely referenced SERVQUAL models for assessing service quality through five dimensions — tangibles, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and assurance — is the one developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). Pauli et al. (2023), Alshourah (2021), and Aburayya et al. (2022) are among scholars who have applied modified sets of these dimensions to study healthcare service quality.

The study by Witiw et al. (2018), which utilized modified SERVQUAL indicators, served as a basis for Ismuroji et al.'s application of Kano model attributes—must-be, one-dimensional, and attractive—in February 2023. Relationships between variables, such as patient satisfaction, trust, commitment, and loyalty, were evaluated quantitatively using Likert scales alongside SPSS v24.

By emphasizing service quality, hospitals can improve patient satisfaction and foster loyalty. The five characteristics of SERVQUAL are still utilized by several scholars, albeit with personalized adjustments tailored to specific objectives (Ramez, 2012; Aburayya et al., 2020). Ultimately, focusing on quality enables healthcare firms to strengthen collaborative relationships, enhance patient retention, and gain a competitive advantage.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the emotional reaction that results from a comparison between the service performance and expectations (Kotler & Armstrong, 1996; Aburayya et al., 2020). Satisfaction arises from positive disconfirmation, which occurs when a service exceeds expectations. Dissatisfaction, on the other hand, results from negative disconfirmation (Pauli et al., 2023).

In healthcare facilities, patient satisfaction is a strategic objective, as it improves profitability and promotes the organization through word-of-mouth advertising (Aburayya et al., 2020). Patient satisfaction is widely accepted as a precursor to loyalty (Afridi et al., 2018), although not all satisfied patients become loyal (Alshourah, 2021). According to Keller (2017), satisfaction occurs when performance meets expectations. This leads to repeat visits, which strengthen the bonds between patients and hospitals (Wulandari et al., 2023).

Asnawi et al. (2019) have investigated the relationship between Satisfaction and loyalty, confirming that satisfaction has a positive impact on loyalty. In this case, however, Liu et al. (2021) showed no such relationship. Nevertheless, advocates claim such patients will always champion their organization where they received value for their service (AlShehhi et al., 2023). Other studies also confirm the connection, claiming that satisfied consumers demonstrate greater loyalty than dissatisfied ones (Alshourah, 2021). Some researchers take reputation to be an element of satisfaction (Alshourah, 2021). A favorable image enhances satisfaction and helps convert satisfied customers into loyal ones (Abd-El-Salam et al., 2013). Reputation also plays a crucial role in the satisfaction and loyalty relationship, as demonstrated by Alshourah (2021).

A satisfied customer does not automatically mean they are a loyal customer; however, loyalty often emerges from a blend of emotional and functional satisfaction (Lakew, 2022). Jou and Day (2021) highlight that pleased customers are often brand advocates who speak loudly about the brand. Satisfaction reinforces Ishikawa's relationship with the sensei strategy, which focuses on retaining customers for extended periods (Alshourah, 2021).

Commitment

Commitments refer to a customer's motivation to sustain a valued relationship over time. As described by Alshourah (2021), it is a relatively deep and long commitment for both parties involved. High perceived value enhances commitment, which, in turn, induces customers to reciprocate organizational efforts as explained by Ndubisi (2014).

Khan et al. (2020) identify three forms of commitment as affective/emotional connection, normative/moral obligation, and instrumental/practical necessity. Commitment solidifies an association that can be based on preference, duty, or convenience. Teshome (2018) argues that trust and cooperation emerge from shared value-driven outcomes, jointly reinforcing relationship stability, as advocated by Alshourah (2021). The present study, therefore, regards commitment as the key dimension of patient loyalty because of the reasoning above.

Corporate Image

A well-defined corporate image is essential for loyalty in healthcare. Reputation becomes paramount in clinching patient loyalty when they can easily switch to alternative service providers (Alshourah, 2021). Effective hospital branding serves both patient satisfaction and strategic objectives (Alshourah, 2021).

Components of a hospital's image include interactions with patients, employee professionalism, and the provision of services (Alshourah, 2021). Ismuroji et al. (2023) posit that the perception is so powerful that it may counterbalance negative perceptions of the service. Public hospitals in Jordan face overwhelming scrutiny due to the demands of the refugee population, which diminishes the quality of care provided (Alshourah, 2021). Trustworthy images become more integral under such conditions.

Kotler (2017) defines image as the way the public perceives services, while Aminah et al. (2017) emphasize that it is built over time through various channels. Clow & Baack (2018) provide a broader view, referring to an image as a set of emotional and cognitive impressions patients hold concerning a given hospital. A positive image confers a competitive advantage, as it builds trust, strengthens loyalty, and enhances reputation management (Trisno & Berlianto, 2022).

According to Alshourah (2021), a hospital's image influences satisfaction and loyalty, while also serving as a bridge connecting hospitals and patients. Ismuroji et al. (2023) differentiate between organizational image, which is the impression created by some stakeholders, and reputation, which is a broader public judgment. A strong corporate image bolsters patient acquisition and retention, while also deterring competition. Afthanorhan et al. (2018) note that patients often select hospitals based on referrals or reputation, which confirms the institution's standing. According to Aldaihani et al. (2023), an image serves as a strategic long-term asset for an organization, as it cannot be easily replicated, thereby reinforcing its competitive advantage.

As defined by Kethan and Basha (2022), corporate image refers to the public perception of a company through its physical and behavioral features, which collectively shape the brand identity. Hizam and Ahmed (2020) stated that a strong corporate image fosters loyalty and affects quality appraisal. The study adopts corporate image as the fourth pillar of loyalty due to its enduring influence on patient behavior and satisfaction (Kotler, 2017; AlSaleh, 2019; Aldaihani et al., 2023).

The Effect of Hospital Image on Patient Loyalty and Patient Satisfaction

As Keller (2017) notes, brand image has an impact on patients' service choices and is particularly salient in situations where expertise is lacking. A healthcare facility's reputation influences both patient satisfaction and intentions to return (Alshourah, 2021); however, this is contradicted by Kethan and Basha (2022). A reputable hospital increases the probability of patients' loyalty (Alshourah, 2021).

Aldaihani et al. (2023) are associated with a strong reputation, advanced corporate image, and enhanced customer satisfaction. Alshourah (2021) argues that perception, particularly regarding the services rendered at hospitals, overshadows product features in determining a patient's overall experience. Patients tend to report higher satisfaction levels with a hospital when they have a favorable perception of its image (Alshourah, 2021). Ismuroji et al. (2023) state that the hospital image has an indirect effect on behavioral intention through satisfaction.

Trust

Establishing trust is of paramount importance in healthcare, as patients invest both emotionally and financially when making decisions about their care. They expect healthcare personnel to demonstrate basic professionalism, compassion, and moral conduct as customers (Alshourah, 2021). High attitudinal and behavioral loyalty—often referred to as customer or patient engagement has been documented with strong doctor-patient relationships (Alshourah, 2021).

In China, however, outpatient trust dropped to only 21.78% while inpatient trust climbed slightly higher to 26.66%. Both figures are woefully low in terms of trust in physicians (Witiw et al., 2018). This erosion of trust has cultural and systemic roots, including excessive workloads and inadequate communication between doctors and patients (Tjiptono et al., 2017).

Trust refers to a party's belief in the partner's reliability and honesty (Alam et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2018). It is positively correlated with Satisfaction and Loyalty, as shown by various studies, including Ismuroji et al. (2023). Trust is generally accepted as instrumental in supporting long-term relationships, despite some studies finding no strong link between intention to revisit a facility and trust (Alshourah, 2021).

Trust enables patients to make escalated psychological and transactional commitments through a decreased risk perception of exploitation, allowing for deeper, long-term engagement and enduring loyalty. This study incorporates trust as a critical variable in examining the patient loyalty model.

The Effect of Hospital Image on Patient Loyalty through E-Trust

The image of a hospital, which is shaped by a general impression formed over an extended period through numerous information streams, significantly impacts loyalty (Aminah et al., 2017). An enhanced hospital image improves perceived service quality, thereby increasing patient satisfaction and loyalty (Alshourah, 2021). Nonetheless, Wulandari et al. (2023) did not find direct links between hospital image and loyalty.

Trust serves as a mediator between hospital image and loyalty. Trust is essential in commercial interactions and shapes patients' expectations that a healthcare provider will be competent, honest, and benevolent (Khan et al., 2020).

Research by Alshourah (2021) demonstrates that trust mediates the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Trust helps develop long-term relationships with patients in healthcare settings, positively impacting health outcomes and fostering loyalty to the institution (Wulandari et al., 2023).

Switching Costs and Available Alternatives

Switching costs refer to the time, effort, and monetary risks that a consumer perceives they will incur when changing service providers (Liu et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2020). This encompasses relationship costs along with procedural expenses and losses of relationships (Khan et al., 2020). Furthermore, perceived switching risks, such as search efforts and ambiguities, contribute to loyalty (Alshourah, 2021).

Defined by Jou and Day (2021), alternative attractiveness refers to the perceived desirability of other options, also described as alternative loyalty determinants. Customers tend to stay loyal to their providers until they identify more rewarding alternatives (Alshourah, 2021). Research presents mixed outcomes: some argue that switching costs weaken the satisfaction-loyalty link (Alshourah, 2021), while others argue that heightened satisfaction strengthens this bond (Alshourah, 2021).

Where appealing alternatives are scant, dissatisfied customers may be forced to remain "hostage" because of limited choices (Alshourah, 2021). Such customers leave once conditions for switching improve or better options become available (Aburayya et al., 2020). For these reasons, the study seeks to measure loyalty influenced by the dual factors of switching costs alongside alternative attractiveness.

Health Care in the United Arab Emirates

Healthcare services switching costs in the UAE refer to the time, effort, and money a consumer considers necessary to spend when changing service providers (Liu et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2020). It includes relationship costs alongside procedural costs and losses of social ties (Jou & Day, 2021). Additionally, perceived switching risks, such as ambiguities and information search, also contribute to loyalty (Alshourah, 2021).

Customers tend to remain loyal until more valuable alternatives present themselves (Alshourah, 2021). The literature presents mixed arguments: some contend that ignoring a provider due to high switching costs undermines the satisfaction-loyalty attachment in focus (Alshourah, 2021), while others contend that increased satisfaction reinforces this attachment (Alshourah, 2021).

Where desirable alternatives are scarce, dissatisfied consumers may have no option but to stay "hostage" due to a lack of wearing options (Alshourah, 2021). Such consumers remain captive until better conditions or more attractive value propositions emerge (Alshourah, 2021). Therefore, this research aims to determine the loyalty influenced by the dual factors of switching costs and alternative attractiveness. Healthcare expenditure was dominated by public spending, accounting for approximately 67 percent of total spending from 2000 to 2015 (Syahril et al., 2022). The UAE has a multi-tiered healthcare regulatory framework with both federal and emirate-level oversight (Ndubisi, 2014). The Federal Insurance Authority plays a key role in achieving universal health coverage (Meesala & Paul, 2018). Although international accreditation is available, with over 70% of healthcare institutions accredited (Abuzaid et al., 2023), a lack of standardized local provider quality control remains.

With around nine million people insured in the UAE, the insurance market has become quite fragmented, with sixty-one providers. The top five providers have captured a 56.2 percent market share (AlShehhi et al., 2023). Over the past two decades, the accessibility and quality of healthcare services in the UAE have undergone significant improvements. However, the remaining decrease in oil revenues continues to make sustaining affordable service quality challenging.

Improving healthcare is a key focus of the National Agenda 2021, particularly in the areas of preventive medicine and reducing non-communicable diseases (AlShehhi et al., 2022; Abuzaid et al., 2023). Additionally, AED 4.84 billion was allocated to enhance Service and Clinical Excellence in 2020.

Conclusion

Even though relationship marketing is not a new concept, it remains one of the most important concepts in the service industry for creating value in customer-seller interactions (Woldemeskel, 2017). Berry proposed the idea of relationship marketing as early as 1983 (Berry, 1995) and emphasized that strong relationships between service providers and clients can mitigate vulnerability, which is common during the initial use of personal services (Mandira et al., 2018). Customers may choose to relate or not relate, willingly switch providers, or remain dependent on an unrestricted structure without coercion (Alshourah, 2021).

Marketing has certainly changed over time. It has evolved into a dialogue centered on shared value creation and engagement (Alshourah, 2021). Multi-service firms must place a greater emphasis on relationship marketing by transforming satisfactory services into extraordinary ones (Negassa & Japee, 2023). Effective communication, alongside service guarantees and elevating behavioral standards, fosters trust; three strategies suggested by Berry

(1995) are effective in this regard. In a healthcare context, failing to address patient satisfaction adequately can have dire financial ramifications. As noted by Alshourah (2021) and other scholars, both satisfaction and trust are critical factors in managing customer retention alongside loyalty. Zarei et al. (2018) noted that accompanied loyalty demonstrates a character trait of persistence in utilizing an institution’s services, which is well captured by the positive results that focus on the available services. However, opposing viewpoints suggest that the impact of satisfaction on fostering loyalty is insufficient (Alshourah, 2021), highlighting the need for further empirical investigation into the interrelationship between these concepts.

The effect that trust has on loyalty remains a topic of equal contention within the literature. While several studies affirm its positive effects (Alshourah, 2021), others pose disagreement, particularly in situations where trust is formed over shorter durations (Jani & Han, 2011). The gap illustrated by this conflicting evidence necessitates further exploration of the relationship between trust, satisfaction, and loyalty over time.

The literature has studied these variables in healthcare. Alshourah (2021) created a revised version of the hospital image, patient satisfaction, service loyalty, and clinic brand reputation interrelationship diagram as an integrated model. Aburayya et al. (2020) modified SURVEQAL to assess service quality and satisfaction explicitly with private healthcare companies in Malaysia. Aburayya et al. (2020) incorporated trust and commitment as mediators between satisfaction and loyalty in Indonesia.

The researcher recommends testing the influence of service quality, commitment, switching costs, and available alternatives on patient experience in healthcare organizations in the UAE, either qualitatively or quantitatively. The researcher also recommends testing the relationship between patient experience, hospital image, and patient satisfaction, as well as patient loyalty, in healthcare organizations in the UAE. The emphasis on improving patient experience and building a positive reputation for hospitals indicates the importance of satisfaction and loyalty in healthcare organizations in the UAE. Focusing on quality healthcare, trust, and a good reputation enables hospitals to retain patients and reduce the likelihood of patients switching to other organizations, thus improving the chances of long-term viability in a competitive healthcare market. These aspects, in turn, lead to positive health results and strengthen the UAE's vision of providing exemplary healthcare services to the world.

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