

A conceptual framework of service quality on patient's behavioral assessment: Insight from Pakistan

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Abstract: The healthcare sector is progressively modest and patients expect higher service quality; therefore, healthcare practitioners' and academic researchers' attention upsurges in exploring service quality, intensifying satisfaction and generating behavioral intention. Despite the significance of the healthcare sector and the importance of quality-related matters, there is a paucity of research and publications dealing with healthcare service quality. This conceptual review evaluates the service quality in Pakistani healthcare sector rendering patients' perspective. The proposed model emphasizes patients' switching intention caused by poor or inadequate service quality through intervening constructs of satisfaction and alternative attractiveness. Additionally, current review explored the alternative attractiveness as mediator which was neglected in healthcare context. The model also attempts to propose the association between alternative attractiveness and outcome variable by switching costs regarding patients' perspectives. The conceptual framework enables hospital managers to comprehend how patients assess healthcare quality provided in the presence of alternatives. The perception of patients would assist them in allocating healthcare resources and hospital management attain performance feedback through service quality parameters. Present review developed an inclusive framework as a novel injector in healthcare sector for patients' perceived service quality.

Keywords: service quality; satisfaction; alternative attractiveness; switching cost; switching intention; patients

1. Introduction

Healthcare system consider as social response to determine the healthcare delivery (Gurewich et al., 2020). It embraces on the involvement of organizations, people, resources and agencies which provide service to encounter healthcare needs of the population, community and individual's (Mills, 2014). Healthcare system in Pakistan consists on public, private, parastatal, philanthropic contributors, donor agencies and civil society. It illustrated by high burden of non-communicable and communicable disease, maternal mortality rates and high population growth (Akseer et al., 2020). Nevertheless, country is experiencing considerable economic, environmental and social changes where basic health care services are the main problem of the people of Pakistan (Muhammad et al., 2023). According to World Health Organization (WHO), the healthcare system of Pakistan fails to provide better health care to the people of the country (Das et al., 2020). Further, Pakistan lies among

those countries where people pay highest revenue out of pocket to get health care facilities (Khalid et al., 2020). The government of Pakistan is conferring 2.88% of the total GDP for the financing of the healthcare system and providing free healthcare service to the people of their country (Statista, 2023). Despite this, patients are switching from public hospital to private hospitals and only 30% of the population got govt health facility and 70% of population switch to private sector to get healthcare services (Naz et al., 2021). In relation to this issue, it has been stated that in future the healthcare precedence will be more towards prevention of the disease (Mattoo, 2014).

Therefore, remarkable changes are required in public hospitals in facilitating patients to provide better healthcare services. As Quality is considered an important aspect in distinction and excellence of services (Alolayyan, 2022; Mahmood et al., 2022), it also provides potential causes of sustainable competitive advantages in healthcare sector (Hosseini, 2018). Alternative attractiveness is important in healthcare because poor services make patients more likely to seek other options. Ensuring high-quality care can help retain patients and reduce the appeal of alternatives. The competition in healthcare sector is very intensive as different alternatives providing same services that can attract existing customers. Numerous studies have investigated the role of service quality with patient satisfaction (Alghamdi, 2014; Amarantou et al., 2019), but a clear gap exist regarding the role of alternative attractiveness in healthcare setting. Unlike retail, and hospitality services where alternative attractiveness is highly valued (El-Adly, 2019). Furthermore, alternative attractiveness may drive the behavioral intention among patients which may leads to the switching intention with current service provider.

Based on above arguments, current study objective is to conduct comprehensive conceptual review of service quality impact on switching intention of the patients with focusing on mediating role of satisfaction and alternative attractiveness as well as moderating role of switching cost. This review synthesizes extent literature to comprehend how aspects interact within healthcare context. This study also seeks to provide insights to determine patient's decision-making process and loyalty, providing theoretical framework that can direct future researchers and administrators to develop strategies to improve service quality to retain patients.

2. Literature review

2.1. Service quality and patient satisfaction

Service quality emanates from associating about what customers expect from a seller with their performance. Therefore, customer found service quality as an abstract and elusive concept which determined by customer individual knowledge and understanding (Chan et al., 2022; Rauf et al., 2024a). In healthcare sector, customers are considered as patients and doctor, nurses and paramedical staffs, who have knowledge, intellectual skills, professional attitude and competencies are consider as service provider (Lee, 2017; Shafiq et al., 2017). Mostly, services are intangible in hospitals, such as hospital atmosphere, doctor's skill, hygiene, and caring staff, therefore patients' expectation regarding services based upon their understanding and effectiveness (Abbasi-Moghaddam et al., 2019). Providing quality services to the patients according to their need and expectation is very decisive for the patient

satisfaction and survival of any service organization in competitive healthcare market (Novitasari, 2022). Precise recognition of patient's expectation and need is an important step in delivering and defining better service quality (Rauf et al., 2024b). Thus, patients' expectations based upon their perception of optimal care standard and previous service experience (Afthanorhan et al., 2019). Subsequently, quality perception has strong influence on inclination to get health services beyond dispute (Tan et al., 2019), and provide satisfaction to the patients (Radu et al., 2022).

Numerous studies emphasized to determine role of service quality in hospitals along with satisfaction of the patient and claim that service quality effect patient satisfaction (Amarantou et al., 2019; Guglielmetti et al., 2022). Previous studies also show that patients' expectation associate with their satisfaction from service providers, and unmet expectation are associate with dissatisfaction of the patient (Hudson and Li, 2012; Zienawi et al., 2019). Moreover, patient is bound to spend money to get better healthcare services and save their time and lives. Contingent upon, patients visit service providers with greater expectations and based on these expectations, patients evaluate service provider (Al-Balas et al., 2024). Studies carried out related to Pakistan healthcare sector, reveal those public hospitals of Pakistan lagging behind private hospitals and healthcare services affecting patient satisfaction (Ali et al., 2024; Shabbir et al., 2016). Teixeira et al. (2012) stated that service quality is a human oriented process because service provider features can't standardize or uniform and medical negligence can occur during interaction and poor dealing among patients and medical staff (Lee et al., 2016). The prevalence of such error cause by medical staff ranges from 30 to 80% (Reason, 2000). So, improvement in service quality may reduce medical negligence's which increase patient satisfaction.

2.2. Patient satisfaction and alternative attractiveness

Satisfaction considered as response of customer fulfillment, and judgment regarding service or product, or provide pleasurable consumption level (Oliver 1970). Furthermore, satisfaction is about nurturing and encountering customer expectation and perceptions to increase customer delivered value (Aliman and Mohamad, 2016). Patient satisfaction is an important aspect in patient behavioral intention, as it provide information regarding healthcare service success and expectation relevant to the patients (Cham et al., 2022). It is also seen that when patient expectations fulfilled, they visit clinic profoundly and it make them adhere to hospital personnel (Rapport et al., 2019), which reduce patients' complaints, increase patients return, and reduce alternative attractiveness (Mukamel et al., 2018). Moreover, physician communication skills and healthcare services are most important components of the patient satisfaction. Therefore, better quality had utmost effect on patient's satisfaction which endure the relationship and may reduce alternative attractiveness. Additionally, Spotts (2014) stated that lower satisfaction increases the alternative attractiveness among patients, because health services are life threatening and less satisfy patient do not want to take risk. The relationship between satisfaction and alternative attractiveness is well supported in tourism and retail sector (Jiang and Lau 2021; Ping, 2003), but in healthcare sector it needs to be explore more.

2.3. Alternative attractiveness and switching intention

Alternative attractiveness as affirmative features of contending service provider, which influence consumer behavior towards alternative. The higher level of alternative attractiveness about competing service provider, the higher chance of quitting current service provider (García and Curras-Perez, 2019; Rasheed et al., 2024). According to Bintoro et al. (2023), customers basic consideration is to choose one alternative to get services which reduce the complexity of purchase process. Paradoxically, customer tiredness with low service quality motivates them toward alternative that paved a way for switching.

In healthcare sector, Patient is more informed and do not hesitate to switch alternative health service provider if current service provider not meet his expectations (Hardavella et al., 2017). Patients expect to get same services which they come to expect in hospital (Ferreira et al., 2019). Healthcare facilities are built with emphasize functional delivery of health service. However, since patients are more prone and conscious about their healthcare services having an impact on attractiveness to other service provider. Conventionally, patients did not have power and feel glad to receive any assistance from the doctor but changing their behavior taking more importance to their health, taking care of themselves and less decumbent to overlook incapability. Moreover, physicians could not enjoy high esteem which experienced before because patients are more probably asking about professional judgment, criticism and seek for alternative (Hardavella et al., 2017) and consequently, increase in alternative attractiveness boost the intention of switching (Oh and Park, 2020).

2.4. Satisfaction as mediator

Numerous past studies consider satisfaction as an effective construct rather than cognitive (Alyahya et al., 2020; López-Mosquera and Sánchez, 2014). It indicates the belief of customers in the probability of service which leads to positive feelings (Jeong et al., 2019). Patient pursues to assure quality-of-service delivery to maximize the satisfaction about service experience and recovery from service dissatisfaction (Mrabet et al., 2022). Satisfaction of the patient depends on the experience of utilizing services; therefore, organizations ensure that the patient has gone through a good experience while buying services (Manzoor et al., 2019). Satisfaction of the patients is also essential because it increases the competition among the healthcare service provider (Ariga et al., 2022).

The primary role of satisfaction in healthcare is likewise imitated in people who do responsive practice to achieve their demand and health goals for high service quality (George et al., 2010; Tresidder 2011). Healthcare service buyers are well aware and informed; they do not hesitate to switch the existing service provider with an available alternative if they are not satisfied (Siwicki, 2020). For patients, these arguments imply that lower service quality decreases patient satisfaction which ultimately leads to alternative attractiveness. Several past researchers used satisfaction as mediator in their studies. Karunaratna and Kumara (2018), used satisfaction as mediator in marketing context, Olorunniwo et al. (2006), in the service industry, Zhou et al. (2019), in education sector, Arfin et al. (2019), in wood management industry, and Kitapci et al. (2014), used satisfaction as a mediator in healthcare sector.

2.5. Alternative attractiveness as mediator

Alternative attractiveness significantly influences the relationship between service buyer and service provider (Hanaysha, 2018). A higher alternative attractiveness decreases the satisfaction of the current relationship with service provider (García and Curras-Perez, 2019). The good performance of the alternative decreases the satisfaction with current service provider (Zhang et al., 2020). Switching intention is an effort initiated by the patient to change its old service provider to a new service provider (Quoquab et al., 2018). The patient switching tendency is invincible, particularly when customers associate with causes that influence the customer's mental health, which ultimately results in switching intention (Tihamiyu et al., 2020). However, when individuals perceive another service provider as more attractive, it may be a significant constraint to the switching action.

Patient often switches service providers because they think they will get more satisfaction from a new service provider than previous. Additionally, switching happens when there are variations among alternatives and respond satisfactorily to other service suppliers (Salhie, 2019). Furthermore, in healthcare sector, if patient is less satisfied and alternative exit in market it will increase alternative attractiveness and appeal more to get medical treatment from other hospital (Hsieh et al., 2018). Different studies in the past used alternative attractiveness as mediator. Jiang and Lau (2021), used alternative attractiveness as a mediator in economic sector, Hilmi and Rachmawati (2018), used in mobile service sector, and Yen and Horng (2010) used alternative attractiveness as a mediator in customer industry.

2.6. Switching cost as moderator

Switching cost is classified as psychological, multidimensional or monetary approach in early literature (Elnazer and Almetwally, 2022). Besides, Jones et al. (2002) adopt six switching intention dimensions to measure it, namely uncertainty cost, lost performance cost, evaluation and pre-switching cost, sunk cost, setup cost, cognitive and post switching behavioral cost. In healthcare sector, switching cost categorize in three mechanisms namely, money, time and effort. It also reported that perceived switching cost can directly influence customer trust and loyalty (Aydin et al., 2005; Mahmood and Rauf, 2018). Additionally, Jones et al. (2002) classify switching barriers into interpersonal relationships, attractiveness of alternative and perceived switching cost. Study also stated that every switching cost type have different effect on revisit intention of the patients. Recent study used cost of switching as a mediator in relationship among satisfaction and loyalty (Mntande et al., 2023). Chen and Chang (2008), illustrate moderating role of the switching cost and indicate that switching cost moderate service quality effect on receiver intention. Consequently, relationship among service quality and revisit intention intensify when there is low switching cost. Past studies reveal that switching cost moderate the customer intention to switch service provider (Harazneh et al., 2020; Willys, 2018).

3. Propose research model

Present review deliberates growing phenomena regarding public hospitals mechanism related to developing countries context. Based on literature review, we

proposed model which connects service quality with consequent satisfaction and alternative attractiveness through the influential role of switching cost toward switching intention and reinforce experience in healthcare prospective. The proposed model provides considerable information about patients in public hospital and also provide future research implications. Several past studies shown that better service quality led to more positive satisfaction behavior of patients or vice versa (Ahmed et al., 2022; Cham et al., 2022), because it is anticipated that patient satisfaction should be multidimensional concept (Rahman et al., 2023). Moreover, physicians could not enjoy high esteem which experienced before because patients are more probably asking about professional judgment, criticize and seek for alternative (Hardavella et al., 2017) and consequently, increase in alternative attractiveness boost the intention of switching correlation (Oh and Park, 2020). The literature review classified switching cost as psychological, multidimensional, or monetary approach (Elnazer and Almetwally, 2022; Mahmood et al., 2023), and switching cost moderate customer switching intention in service-related environment (Harazneh et al., 2020; Willys, 2018).

Grounded on above arguments, we proposed that decrease in service quality and satisfaction develop alternative attractiveness which leads to the switching intention through switching cost. Model of current proposed research was highlighted in **Figure 1**. Henceforth, researcher offer multiple propositions like (P1: service quality has an optimistic impact on patients' satisfaction; P2: poor satisfaction has an optimistic impact on alternative attractiveness; P3: alternative attractiveness has an optimistic impact on switching intention; and P4: switching cost positively and significantly moderate the relationship of alternative attractiveness and the switching intention, so the relationship is weaker when switching cost is higher. The medical communities in developing countries widely recognize the healthcare as real phenomena. This review discloses capacities of public hospital attributes that cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and it also interprets critical and most determinant attributes in overall patient experience in specific healthcare context.

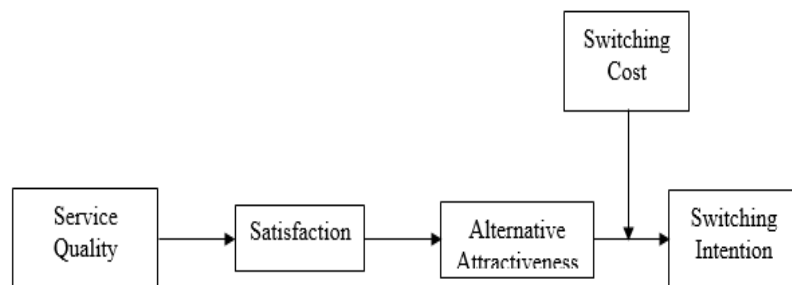


Figure 1. The conceptual model.

Service quality in healthcare includes several key components which refers to the willingness and ability of healthcare providers to help patients and perform promised healthcare services dependably and accurately in best physical facilities. It may influence the perceived value and satisfaction of the patients. Satisfaction level of the patients refers to the alternative attractiveness to the perceived desirability of other available healthcare options and includes the availability of other providers, perceived

benefits, and patient preferences. Lastly, switching cost is a critical moderating variable that includes financial costs, or the direct monetary costs associated with changing healthcare providers; time and effort, which involves the amount of time and effort required to switch providers, including the process of transferring medical records and finding a new provider; and psychological costs, which encompass the mental and emotional stress associated with changing providers, including the uncertainty and discomfort of building a new patient-provider relationship. By detailing these components, we aim to provide a more comprehensive and clear understanding of the variables influencing patient intention and the roles of satisfaction, alternative attractiveness, and switching cost in healthcare settings.

4. Conclusion, implications and future direction

4.1. Conclusion

Despite remarkable growth in healthcare sector, there are little knowledge about the role of service quality and satisfaction while elucidating patient switching intention in public hospitals in Pakistan. Service is a wider concept that addresses patient experiences and the service care delivery process. There is substantial evidence that shows that service quality improvement depends on hospital staff participation in quality enhancement process. The basic aim of the review is to present conceptual model (**Figure 1**) which clearly elucidates developing countries patients switching intention, by considering impact of service quality satisfaction, alternative attractiveness and switching cost. The current review has preliminary contribution in greater understanding of patients switching intention from public to private hospitals in Pakistan.

Service quality is complex and challenging task as because there are several stakeholders in hospital with diverse aims, expectations and agendas. The interaction among patient and service provider effects patient satisfaction and creates value in healthcare sector. Therefore, switching experience of the patient can minimized with well-designed service quality and delivery process in healthcare sector. Moreover, future studies can contribute in development of experiential studies to test proposed model impact in healthcare sector. There is considerable research scope in healthcare sector although substantial challenges regarding public hospitals are there which provide contentious result. Service quality and alternative attractiveness is an important niche in current healthcare sector. It's not new phenomenon and has origin in hospitals tradition as rejuvenation, offering escape, and health.

Researchers should recognize mediating nature of satisfaction and alternative attractiveness though developing theory. The impact of service quality on switching intention may exaggerated when above mediators boost specific healthcare context. Another remarkable implication regarding ethics in public hospitals of Pakistan is that physician differentiate in rich and poor patient while providing services and involved in malpractice by shifting responsibility of patients to another (poor toward rich) without justification which induce patients to switch physician and hospital due to dishonest and unethical behavior. Understanding of the patient behavior in particular context of healthcare provide valuable information for public hospital planning, and administrative sustenance for stakeholder. Healthcare research is exceedingly

pertinent market for supplementary reflection but healthcare literature has not fully acknowledged in country. Thus, patient's specific role and their decision-making process become important factor for public hospitals, attendant, and clinics.

4.2. Implications

This review positively contributes to the theory and knowledge in service marketing context in health care sector. It also suggests that service quality directly and positively affect patient satisfaction and alternative attractiveness. The satisfaction of the patient can manage with switching cost and reinforce switching intention in public hospitals with technological advancement, integrated experience, and planning for excellence services in combating economic instability. The current review endeavored to classify satisfaction factors influence switching intention of the patient to switch private hospital to get desired healthcare and adopt planned behavior theory to measure switching intention. It also contributes in healthcare literature, provide inclusive view in the patient treatment, and restructuring the meaning of health-related service sector, which leads to the development of two healthcare dimensions (patient experience and health treatment) which highlighted conceptual value of current review. Overall, current review extends understanding of patient possibility to switch from public hospital to private hospital. Further, this review provide inception for others to generate research in healthcare context and provide direction to the practitioners to develop healthcare strategies for health-conscious patient. This conceptual review also has practical implications for administration and healthcare service providers to increase retention of the patient and service quality. First, it provides insightful understanding of service quality role in patient switching intention underscores necessity for organizations to continuously improve service quality. Second, the study highlights the importance of managing patient perceptions of alternative attractiveness. Healthcare providers should be aware of their competitors and strive to offer unique value propositions that differentiate their services. Third, the moderating role of switching costs suggests that providers should implement strategies to increase the perceived costs associated with switching to another provider. This can be achieved through loyalty programs, long-term patient engagement initiatives, and creating strong emotional bonds with patients

4.3. Limitations and future directions

This is a conceptual review article, and it has a number of limitations. Firstly, it does not collect data from patients, relying instead on existing literature to draw conclusions. Secondly, it does not perform any empirical analysis, which limits the ability to substantiate the theoretical relationships proposed within the framework. Thirdly, the review does not test the relationships between service quality, patient intention, satisfaction, alternative attractiveness, and switching cost, thereby not providing empirical evidence to support or refute these connections. Consequently, the insights offered are theoretical and should be interpreted with caution until validated by empirical research. Future studies can adopt appropriate method to collect and do empirical analysis to enhance the generalizability.

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