



Enhancing patients' hospital satisfaction by taking advantage of interpersonal similarity



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ABSTRACT

According to the customer-to-customer literature, other customers are a prominent influence factor of service perception. Until now, the influence of other patients in shared rooms has been widely ignored in the hospital satisfaction literature. To guide the potential influence of other patients in a positive direction, we examined the effectiveness of interpersonal similarity. Using a scenario-based experimental design, we find that a similar perceived roommate leads to more positive feelings toward hospitalization and higher affective and behavioral attraction to this roommate. The findings indicate that higher attraction ratings mediate participants' increased satisfaction judgements of hospitals. Therefore, assigning roommates by their similarity is an appropriate procedure to raise patients' satisfaction ratings. To gain convenient implications for which similarity dimensions are especially important in every day hospital work life, we conducted group interviews with nurses. Age, habitualities and disease are promising attributes to implement the experimental results in hospitals.

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1. Introduction

Achieving a high quality of hospital services¹ requires patient satisfaction (Otani and Kurz, 2004). To identify promising actions of improvement, patient surveys are a commonly used instrument (Crow et al., 2002; Otani and Kurz, 2004). The majority of empirical and theoretical contributions (Crow et al., 2002; Donabedian, 1980; Grøndahl et al., 2013; Grönroos, 2007; Hardy et al., 1996) indicate the multidimensionality of the formative construct. By examining the respective literature, one quickly infers that investigators most often limit their contemplation to a few or all of the following dimensions: the performance of physicians and nurses, accommodation and food (e.g. Babakus and Mangold, 1992; Carman, 2000; Hall and Dornan, 1990; Hardy et al., 1996; Rahmqvist, 2001). Concerning the percentage of unexplained variance these factors cannot explain the whole variability of the data. Consequently, it cannot be assumed that the health care quality construct has been investigated conclusively. This assumption is supported by the absence of a conclusive definition of the hospital satisfaction construct. To overcome this existing weakness, additional factors have to be identified. Reaching this

goal offers competitive advantages (Otani and Kurz, 2004; Pascoe, 1984).

The approach of this paper is to activate a spillover of the service management literature's customer-to-customer perspective in the hospital management considerations. This is supported by Nicholls (2010), who considers the health care sector in general to be a promising research field for customer-to-customer interaction. The importance of the value of considering customer-to-customer interactions for a service type is conceived by theory of self-congruence (Sigry, 1982; Sigry et al., 2000) as well as Martin and Pranter's (1989) kick-off paper. This kick-off paper draws out the general theoretical debate on customer-to-customer interaction and establishes seven main points for identifying the significance of customer-to-customer interaction in the service field: physical proximity, verbal interaction among customers, heterogeneous customer mix, compatibility of the core service, customers waiting together, customers sharing time and a variety of customer activities. The majority of these points are applicable to hospital services, emphasizing the necessity to investigate the influence of other patients on service perception in hospitals.

Beside this theoretical argumentation, a more intensive debate on customer-to-customer interactions in hospitals serves everyday applications due to a common practice of hospitalization in shared rooms and a preference for shared rooms by the majority of patients (Larsen et al., 2013; Persson et al., 2014). Hospitalized in shared rooms, patients spend more time with their roommates than with other social components of the service environment. We therefore take into account the patient in the next bed to examine

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¹ Please note the terms "satisfaction" and "quality" are used interchangeable in the health care sector (Grøndahl et al., 2013).

how roommates can create additional value for patients' service perception. Predominantly qualitative former studies indicate other patients' impact on well-being of the focal patient. Discussing health-related fears, reciprocal assistance and emotional support affects roommate relationship positive (Cartwright, 1964; Larsen et al., 2013; Isaksen and Gjengedal, 2000). Sharing a room with an ill person can also trigger stress. Differences concerning personal hygiene or communication skills and especially the loss of privacy are incriminating. Also being admitted to a seriously ill roommate implies emotional stress (Larsen et al., 2013). In comparison to other servicescapes customers of hospitals rely on service delivery. So they cannot easily switch the service provider. However, to lever patients recovery satisfaction is important (Choi and Kim, 2013; Park et al., 2014).

The aim of this paper is to characterize the patient in the next bed as essential attribute of the hospital service experience. To create satisfactory roommate relationships we argue for interpersonal similarity as a positive antecedence. By operationalizing similarity on a global level we examine its applicability. To identify useful similarity characteristics for every day hospital work life a subsequent qualitative study is presented.

2. Conceptual framework and development of hypotheses

By disengaging from the hospital care literature and expanding one's view to include the service management literature when searching for promising additional hospital satisfaction indicators, one quickly realizes that contemporary scholars in marketing pay the most attention to customers' relation to the service environment. This service environment is consisting of ambient, design and social cues (Baker, 1987; Nicholls, 2010). Ambient and design factors are comprehended by surveying patients' satisfaction with attributes like access, food and accommodation (e.g. Clemens et al., 2001; Persson et al., 2014). Social cues are characterized by personnel and other customers who are present at the time of service delivery. The influence of social attributes in hospital satisfaction questionnaires is limited to items concerning nurses and physicians. Ignoring other customers in satisfaction measurements is particularly remarkable as the influence of other customers in service encounters was integrated into the service marketing mix more than 30 years ago (Booms and Bitner, 1981).

Former studies conclude that customer-to-customer interactions can affect evaluative outcomes positively or negatively (Brack and Benkenstein, 2012; Brocato et al., 2012; Kim and Kim, 2012; Martin and Pranter, 1989; Slipakit and Fisk, 1985; Söderlund, 2011; Thakor et al., 2008). Contributions in the hospital context indicate roommates can trigger feelings of stress (Cerny et al., 1970; Fleming et al., 1991; Wiltz, 2003), but can also be perceived as supportive (Larsen et al., 2013; Persson et al., 2014; Schaal, 1996). To use this influence in a positive direction, Martin and Pranter (1989) advise service managers to implement compatibility management by, for example, creating homogeneous consumer groups.

Also the theory of self-congruence advocates an influence of the environment on service image. To lever consumer's favorable attitude concerning a service provider attributes such as the environment need to be congruent to a consumer's self-image. By taking into account other customers as part of the environment, customer-to-customer congruence affects service ratings positive (Sigry et al., 2000).

These theoretical assumptions are supported by focus group interviews by Brocato et al. (2012), who suggest that customers should be managed according to their interpersonal similarity to achieve a positive influence. Brack and Benkenstein (2012) provide an empirical evidence for this notion. They point out the effect of

positive feelings on customers' service evaluation that is triggered by one customer's overall similarity to other customers. We follow this research stream and focus on interpersonal similarity as the variable that encourages patient-to-patient interaction and patients' positive evaluation of the hospital.

In doing so, we rely on a well-researched phenomenon called the similarity effect (Byrne, 1971). Since the late 1950s, researchers have studied the role of similarity in predicting interpersonal attraction. Several theories explain the positive connection of similarity and attraction. Heider's (1958) balance theory assumes an individual's desire of a consistent world view. This need is especially satisfied in the presence of other similar individuals. According to the social comparison theory of Festinger (1954) people strive to achieve self-confidence and tend to compare themselves with others. Without available objective comparison criteria individuals relate to their own performances or abilities and then prefer to use similar others for comparison to gain positive comparison results. In sum, the need for cognitive consistency motivates individuals to affiliate with similar others.

Resultant attraction is a positive attitude toward another person. It is accordingly discussed as a multidimensional construct (Jamieson et al., 1987; Kiesler and Goldberg, 1968; McCroskey and McCain, 1974; McCroskey et al., 2006; Montoya and Horton, 2013), but a unified notion is lacking in the literature. As attitudes are discussed as consisting of affective, behavioral and cognitive components Montoya and Horton (2013, p. 2) note that a simple adoption of a tripartite model would "(...) ignore important distinctions and causal relations among the components". They argue that a cognitive evaluation of capacity and willingness of the target subject is an antecedent process of behavioral and affective attraction. Following their comprehension, behavioral attraction is much more influenced by perceivers' situational goals, while affective attraction is determined by enduring goals like self-interest and social acceptance. Consequently, the researchers advocating behavioral and affective attraction may diverge in some situations (Montoya and Horton, 2013). By using this twofold attraction concept in our study, we move beyond the basic approach of Byrne (1971), who considers attraction as merely affective (Montoya and Insko, 2008).

The positive link between similarity and attraction is investigated using different stages of relationships – also for short interactions that might resemble the hospital room (Montoya et al., 2008; Tidwell et al., 2013). However, there is little research concerning hospital patients. Previously studied populations may be incomparable, as the effects of similarity are deemed to be situation specific (Brack and Benkenstein, 2012; Cheney, 1975; Rogers and Bhowmik, 1970). Hospitalization – meaning an exceptional situation that may distort normal needs – calls for particular attention to patients (Schaal, 1996; Siegrist, 1978). Our purpose is to examine the utility of the similarity effect in terms of creating positive perceived roommate relationships in hospital rooms.

Research on interactions between patients and medical staff shows that the effectiveness of similarity in the physician–patient dyad has already been established (Bertakis et al., 2009; Furnham and Swami, 2008; Jahng et al., 2005; Keressens et al., 1997; Siminoff et al., 2006; Street et al., 2008; Young, 1979). Positive effects of interpersonal similarity include affection (Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1978) as well as greater emotional involvement (Andersen et al., 1998; Aron et al., 1991). Several studies emphasize spillover effects of a positive health care professionals–patients relationship on service evaluation (Campbell et al., 2000), satisfaction and recovery (Kelley et al., 2014). The context resemblance of patient–physician dyads and patient–patient dyads suggests that the similarity effect is applicable to patient–patient dyads and we therefore suggest that similarity influences the attraction judgments of patients.

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