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Linking Service Quality, Patients' Satisfaction and Behavioral Intentions: An investigation on Private Healthcare in Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the association between perceived service quality, patients' satisfaction and behavioral intentions in the private health care industry in Malaysia, a developing country. Hospital outpatients were selected as respondents for this study using the convenience sampling technique. Survey questionnaires were distributed to 300 hospital outpatients who had received health care treatment at the private hospitals in 2010 and 2011. Two hundred and seventy-three (273) completed data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Multiple regressions were employed to test the hypotheses. The results indicated that service quality dimensions positively affected the intention behaviors. All service factors had positive relationships with patients' satisfaction. However, only three dimensions of service quality (tangibles, assurance and empathy) showed significant relationships with intention. In addition, tangibles, reliability and assurance had significant relationship with satisfaction. Assurance dimension was considered very important in influencing both satisfaction and behavioral intentions of the patients. Satisfaction had strong positive effects on intention behavior. In short, both service quality dimensions and patients' satisfaction were positively related to behavioral intentions. Thus, strong managerial orientations should be introduced in the private hospitals in order to deliver a high quality service, to increase patient satisfaction, and consequently encourage intentions to revisit and recommend to others.

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1. Introduction

The role of service quality is widely recognized as being a critical determinant for the success and survival of any organization in today's competitive environment. Although there are many factors affecting the attitude and intention of the consumer, it is widely recognized that perception of service quality is the most important among them.

According to Nelson et al. (2004), patients' perceptions of quality have been shown to account for 17-27 per cent of the variation in a hospital's financial measures such as earnings, net revenue, and return on assets. Yong (2000) found that the revenue from private hospitals contributed close to 50 percent of the health-care industry's total earnings. As such, the importance of service management and service quality in the health care industry is also expected to increase in future. Naturally, any decline in customer satisfaction due to poor service quality would be a matter of concern. Thus, with a rising and aging population, the government of Malaysia strives to improve many areas in the health care industry.

Sohail (2003) indicated that Malaysian health-care providers seem to be doing a commendable job in achieving customer satisfaction with regards to service quality. His study proves that hospitals in Malaysia provide services that often exceed the expectations of most patients, implying that Malaysians have positive perceptions of the service quality.

In many countries, research on health care quality and patient satisfaction has gained increasing attention in recent years (Abdul Majeed et al., 2011; Navid et al., 2010; Owusu-Frimpong et al., 2010; Halil et al., 2010; Badri et al., 2009; Elleuch, 2008). Likewise, a few studies have investigated this issue in the Malaysian context (Norazah et al., 2011; Navid et al., 2010; Ahmad Azmi et al., 2008; Rose et al., 2004; Sohail, 2003). However, none of them have investigated service quality, patient satisfaction and intention behaviors of patients in Malaysian private hospitals. Since service quality, satisfaction and behavioral intentions are considered very important in marketing, this study attempts to fill the gap by examining the relationship between the three concepts among private hospital outpatients from each state in the country.

2. Previous research

Wilson et al. (2008) noted that understanding customers' views on service quality is critical for any service provider interested in ensuring that they are being responsive to clients. Further, Musalem and Joshi (2009) indicated that any business entity interested in being competitive in a market place must be responsive to its customers.

2.1. *Service quality, patient satisfaction and behavioral intentions*

Service quality determinants can be divided into two main categories: the tangible and intangible factors. Tangible factors refer to technology, physical facilities, personnel, communication materials and others. Intangible factors, on the other hand, consist of four sub-sectors which comprise reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Halil et al., 2010).

Behavior intentions are defined as "patients' potential behaviors likely to be triggered by service quality and satisfaction" (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Most researchers agree that behavioral intentions constitute three dimensions: worth of mouth (WOM) communications, patronage intentions and complaining behavior. The favorable behavioral intentions include elements such as saying positive things and recommending the services to others, paying the premium price to the company, and expressing cognitive loyalty to the organization.

Customer satisfaction has been defined in a variety of ways. Oliver (1997, p. 13) defined satisfaction as "the consumer's fulfillment response": it is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment. Customer satisfaction is about nurturing and meeting customer preferences and expectation in order to enhance customer delivered value (Owusu-Frimpong et al., 2010).

Patient satisfaction with medical care is a multidimensional concept, with dimensions that correspond to the major characteristics of providers such as technical, functional, infrastructure, interaction, atmosphere and also

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