

Impact of Flexibility on Patient Satisfaction and Behavioral Intention: A Critical Reassessment and Model Development

Pradeep Kumar, Shibashish Chakraborty, Sasadhar Bera

Abstract—In the anticipation of demand fluctuations, services cannot be inventoried and hence it creates a difficult problem in marketing of services. The inability to meet customers (patients) requirements in healthcare context has more serious consequences than other service sectors. In order to meet patient requirements in the current uncertain environment, healthcare organizations are seeking ways for improved service delivery. Flexibility provides a mechanism for reducing variability in service encounters and improved performance. Flexibility is defined as the ability of the organization to cope with changing circumstances or instability caused by the environment. Patient satisfaction is an important performance outcome of healthcare organizations. However, the paucity of information exists in healthcare delivery context to examine the impact of flexibility on patient satisfaction and behavioral intention. The present study is an attempt to develop a conceptual foundation for investigating overall impact of flexibility on patient satisfaction and behavioral intention. Several dimensions of flexibility in healthcare context are examined and proposed to have a significant impact on patient satisfaction and intention. Furthermore, the study involves a critical examination of determinants of patient satisfaction and development of a comprehensive view the relationship between flexibility, patient satisfaction and behavioral intention. Finally, theoretical contributions and implications for healthcare professionals are suggested from flexibility perspective.

Keywords—Healthcare, flexibility, patient satisfaction, behavioral intention.

I. INTRODUCTION

WITHIN the economic system, the healthcare industry or medical industry is an area which is involved in providing goods and services for treatment of patients with preventive measures called social medicine; curative like-surgical treatments and also rehabilitative and palliative care. The modern health care service delivery system is divided into various sub-sectors, and it depends upon the workforce of trained professionals and Para-medical staff at different levels, quality equipment and high inventory of materials [1], [2]. Healthcare by nature is a credence purchase and it is one of the fastest growing sectors within the service economy [3], [4].

Report indicates that the rapidly increasing healthcare industry of India is one of the country's largest sectors, both in

terms of revenue and employment and it is estimated that the healthcare industry of India will grow by 40 billion by 2020 [5]. In recent years, the contribution of private healthcare is also increasing. India has become most privatized healthcare system in world and it accounts for around 80% spending from private healthcare [6]. During 2008-20, the market is expected to record a CAGR of 16.5% and total industry size is expected to touch US\$ 280 billion by 2020. The tremendous changes in technology, fast growing rate of disease, intense competition between different players and international community coming to India for healthcare are the major reasons of turbulent environment [7]. In light of economic, political and technological developments witnessed by the modern society with a fierce competition for market and resources- organizations need to put a vision, holistic philosophy which may be able to cope with changing levels of demand pattern, variability caused inside and outside the organizations. This strategic initiative will also increase organizations capability and adaptability in the competitive environment. The major focus of flexibility in healthcare system has been their response to changing nature overall environment and the variability.

In the realm of healthcare delivery context, there is dearth of research to examine the impact of flexibility on patient satisfaction. The present study makes an attempt to explore the impact of flexibility on patient satisfaction and behavioral intention. Hence the objectives of the present study are- i. to develop a comprehensive model of patient satisfaction, ii. to examine the impact of flexibility on satisfaction and behavioral intention.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Patient satisfaction is studied in various researches in relationship with the responsiveness of healthcare organization. Patient satisfaction is defined as a measure of patient's attitude towards the physician, the medical care (patient receives) and the healthcare system [8]. Patient satisfaction is viewed as a vital component of healthcare services and it has been increasingly used as one the indicator of quality of healthcare. Satisfaction is influenced by patient's perception of equity and their emotional responses and perception may include value and price comparison among other customers [9], [10].

Pradeep Kumar, Shibashish Chakraborty, Assistant professor, and Sasadhar Bera, Assistant professor, are with the Indian Institute of Management Ranchi, India (e-mail: Pradeep.kumar14fpm@iimranchi.ac.in, shibashish@iimranchi.ac.in, sbera@iimranchi.ac.in).



Fig. 1 Impact of flexibility on patient satisfaction and B.I.

A. Service quality in healthcare delivery system: Service quality is defined as customer's post-purchase evaluation of service between expectation and performance [11]. The most popular service quality measurement tool is SERVQUAL, which provides five dimensional measure for service quality[12].

An instrument for quality assessment of healthcare centers was developed by some researchers and provided further roadmaps for healthcare quality studies [13]. The study conducted in private hospitals of Malaysia modified the SERVQUAL instrument and revealed that the services provided by private hospitals exceeded the patient's expectations [14]. In an study on Indian hospitals, it was indicated that all the seven dimensions healthcare service quality- infrastructure, personnel quality, process of clinical care, administrative processes, safety indicators, overall experience of medical care and social responsibility were significant predictors of patient satisfaction [15]. An instrument was developed to measure perceived service quality (PubHosQual) in Indian context [16]. Perceived service quality in healthcare context has significant impact on patient satisfaction and loyalty [17]. In an empirical study in the context of corporate hospitals in India, it was found that the service quality dimensions (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness and empathy) has significant impact on patient satisfaction and behavioral intention [7].

- P1: Service quality is an important determinant of patient satisfaction
- B. Perceived value: A service outcome is the desired or intended result of a particular service [18]. The value of service quality given to a service outcome varies on the size of service or the importance of the outcome perceived by the customer. Patients perceive the value of service by the cost and benefit incurred by the service provided. The value emerges as a result of the offset effect between the cost and benefit. The value perceived by the customer affects the service outcome [19]. Hence perceived value by the patients are cost (money, time, effort) compared with the benefit, like remedial or service benefit acquired.

- P2: Perceived value of care is a significant determinant of patient satisfaction.
- C. Price: Healthcare organizations are large and complex network of employees and equipment. Apart from physical conditions and quality of services provided, the cost involved and price perceptions are important in overall satisfaction of patients. In prior studies, it was found that price is an important aspect of customer satisfaction [20]. The price fairness judgment involves a comparison of the price of procedure with a relevant standard, reference or norm [21]. Some other studies have propounded that price has significant impact on patient satisfaction [22].
- P3: Price is an important determinant of patient satisfaction
- D. Flexibility: Flexibility is a multidimensional concept and it has been advocated as competitive capability of the organizations. Flexibility, in its general sense, refers to the response of one or more variables to the changes in one or more related variables. In management, it means the responsiveness of managerial plans and actions to changes in environment [23], [33]. Flexibility is an ability of the organization to respond different environmental uncertainties and changes with little penalty of time, cost, effort or performance [25]. The need for flexibility arises from variability and uncertainty. There are a number of sources of variability in healthcare- patients and diseases, changing legislation, community expectations and competition between service providers, technological advancements [26]. Due to the necessary responsiveness to each patient in the clinical care process, flexibility is always an inbuilt mechanism in healthcare system [3], [24]. In the detailed study conducted by different researchers [27], different sources and strategies for volume flexibility in healthcare context is proposed. Further, in an empirical study, the relationship of volume flexible capability with patient satisfaction was examined and was found to be significant [28]. Clinical-mix flexibility is also explored in healthcare context by [26], [29] and found a significant impact on patient satisfaction. In the context of healthcare service delivery, convenience flexibility is defined as the capability of the healthcare service provider to provide different types of convenience desired by the patients quickly and effectively [25], [30]. Patient recovery flexibility is the ability to recover quickly, when something wrong has happened [31].
- P4: Flexibility is an important determinant of patient satisfaction.
- E. Behavioral Intention: In the healthcare context, behavioral intentions of patients are related with loyalty, positive word of mouth and revisit intentions [7]. Patient satisfaction and their behavioral intentions are positively related in different hospital settings [32]. Prior studies have examined how the patient satisfaction affects the propensity to revisit intention [33].

Hence, in the present study it is proposed that patient satisfaction has positive impact on behavioral intention of

patients. Furthermore, the flexibility strategies of the healthcare service providers are perceived by the patients. Volume flexibility is perceived by the patients in terms of reduced waiting time, bed availability etc. Clinical flexibility is perceived by the patients in terms of the range and variety of services available in the hospital and their effectiveness. Service convenience flexibility is perceived by the patients in terms of payment convenience, home services and flexible - timings of the hospital services. Patient complaint handling, fixing the problems and responsiveness of the hospital employees are perceived by the patient's as recovery flexibility. Hence, the different dimensions of flexibility have positive and significant impact on behavioral intentions of the patients.

- P5: Patient satisfaction has positive impact on behavioral intention of patient's.
- P6: Flexibility of healthcare service providers has significant impact on behavioral intention of patients.

III. IMPLICATIONS

The present study proposes a comprehensive model for determinants of patient satisfaction. The model has been conceptualized that postulates that the relationship between patient satisfaction and behavioral intention. The study explores the understanding of several dimensions of flexibility in healthcare delivery context in order to find out its impact on patient satisfaction and intention. For healthcare practitioners, the dimensions of flexibility provide a mechanism of response to the uncertainty and variability in service encounters. Flexibility is proposed as an important determinant of patient satisfaction, which helps the professionals in better understanding of the several ways for improved service delivery and performance. Furthermore, the antecedent variables of patient satisfaction in healthcare delivery environment are reassessed and a conceptual model from flexibility perspective is proposed for patient satisfaction and behavioral intention.

IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH WORK

Healthcare organizations focus on flexible delivery of healthcare services in order to cope with uncertainty and hence, improved patient satisfaction. This research focuses on understanding of the several determinants of patient satisfaction and explores the patient's perception of flexibility and its impact on behavioral intention. The present study has developed several propositions which may establish the relationships of service quality, perceived value, price and flexibility with patient satisfaction and behavioral intention. Future research should examine the proposed model and the given propositions in the present study. Hence, this study contributes the investigation and reassessment of determinants of patient satisfaction from flexibility perspective and provides theoretical foundation for future empirical research to examine the relationship.

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