

HUMAN RESOURCES AND PATIENT LOYALTY: A CASE STUDY OF THAILAND'S MEDICAL INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

As Thailand's economic activity has been dominated by the services sector and the healthcare industry has been becoming more competitive, acquiring new patients might be a challenge for healthcare facilities, but building loyalty with existing patients, unsurprisingly, seems to be the greater challenge. The present research attempts to examine the impact of human resources on customer loyalty in the medical industry. Four hypotheses were proposed based on the customer relationship management (CRM) theory. To test the hypotheses, an online questionnaire was conducted through Facebook, obtaining 400 valid responses from the customers of healthcare facilities located in Thailand. The results from the linear regression analysis show that customer experience mediates between human resources and the desirable behaviors of customers. The findings of this research could provide valuable insights to service providers, marketers, and researchers, to understand the significance of the workforce, particularly in the healthcare sector.

Keywords: *Customer Relationship Management, Human Resources, Medical Marketing, Patient Loyalty, Service Industries.*

Introduction

Over the last few years, Thailand has poised to be Asia's leading destination for medical tourism (Thailand Board of Investment, 2016). There is no doubt that the medical sector has taken part in driving Thailand's prosperity. According to the Thailand Country Commercial Guide published by the International Trade Administration (ITA), Thailand's healthcare expenditure accounted for 4.3% of GDP in 2018.

As announced by the World Health Organization (WHO), there will be potential patients in Thailand due to the aging society. Besides, on the report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the increasing number of foreign patients who are both tourists and expatriates has brought opportunities to the healthcare industry. Thailand, thus, has encouraged state-of-art medical services and professional healthcare specialists (Thailand Board of Investment, 2019). The Thai government also promoted this market by allocating 15% of its total budget on public health services (International Trade Administration, 2019).

However, organizational performance, in general, does not depend only on financial support, but also on its human resources (Bambale & Goni, 2017). When individuals purchase a service, for instance, they tend to be impressed with the quality of overall interactions with the service provider (Burke *et al.*, 2005). It is possible to expect that effective human resource practices will lead to positive results. Note worthily, prior research revealed that employees comprise crucial factors of corporate performance and the role of human resources could drive the organization towards industrial competitiveness (Nielsen & Montemari, 2012). For this reason, service providers, particularly hospitals, must understand the importance of human resources and its potential to impact business success.

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Whereas previous studies investigated the impacts of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty, this research will focus on the human resources factor, which expected to be an antecedent of patient loyalty in Thailand's medical industry.

Literature Review

- **Human Resources**

Human resources have been recognized as the crucial input for any organization since it could determine a company's success or failure (Orpen, 1993; Batra, 1996).

Numerous studies suggested that the human capital of a firm serves as a key strategic resource in the competitive environment, especially service industries, in which the service quality has to correspond to customer expectations. The achievement of customer satisfaction is contingent on employees' comprehensive understanding of service concept and their orientation towards customer value. (Allred, 2001; Ordóñez de Pablos & Lytras, 2008; Bhatti *et al.*, 2011; Nielsen & Montemari, 2012). It was Redman & Mathews (1998) proposed that employees carry the responsibility of reducing perceived uncertainty through service production and delivery.

As specified by the US National Institute of Health Policy (2017), healthcare needs more than just a doctor. A healthcare facility requires a team of healthcare providers, including (i) doctors, (ii) nurses, (iii) pharmacists, (iv) administrative staff, (v) technicians, and (vi) therapists.

- **CRM and Human Resources**

Marketers perceive CRM as a system consists of three components, i.e. (i) people, (ii) process, and (iii) technology. Organizations must integrate every dimension to ensure the relationships with customers and increase the market share (Almotairi, 2009; Gholamiet *al.*, 2018).

The people component includes the readiness of the firm and collaboration with staff. Employees have to be aligned with organizational strategies and processes. Managers, thus, must encourage employee engagement and motivate them to reach the organization's objectives. (Chu & Pike, 2002; Rahimi, 2017; Gholamiet *al.*, 2018)

There is evidence from past studies that employees who are clear about their roles and value to the organization will be more responsible and deliver better service quality (Mukherjee & Malhotra, 2006; Vilkait & Papšien, 2012). Additionally, according to Vilkait & Papšien (2012), loyal employees are better at identifying customers' needs and developing customer relationship skills.

- **Customer Experience**

According to a study on customer relationship management by Chu & Pike (2002), customer experience refers to the overall interactions with a company, including products, services, and personnel.

Significantly, marketing scholars have discerned the effect of customer experience on purchasing behavior. (Cetin & Dincer, 2013)

Researchers also suggested that companies must manage the emotional element of experiences with the same hardship they manage functionality of their products and services since customer experience is also essential for improving the bonds between firms and their customers (Berry *et al.*, 2002; Chu & Pike, 2002)

- **Customer Loyalty**

There are many definitions of customer loyalty in the marketing context, most share common attributes including motivation and intention to nurture a relationship with the particular firm (Oliver, 1999; Sirdeshmukhet *al.*, 2002). In the modern business world, developing customer loyalty becomes one of the most important goals of both manufacturing and service companies (Irfan *et al.*, 2009).

In the context of service sectors, customer loyalty indicates desirable customer behavior having a positive attitude towards the brand and using only the brand whenever the particular service is needed (Astuti & Nagase, 2014). Marketers thus consider customer loyalty as the dominant factor in the accomplishments of a firm (Yap *et al.*, 2012).

Pointing to the medical industry, it was Chahal (2008) indicated that loyalty of a patient can be measured on three components: (i) visiting the medical facility again for the same treatment, (ii) visiting the medical facility again for different treatments, and (iii) referring the medical facility to others.

- **Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty**

Customer satisfaction refers to the positive attitude a customer develops as a result of the overall post-consumption evaluation which involves their perceptions towards service quality (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Erciet *al.*, 2012).

Generally, customer satisfaction is the primary component of a company's strategic plan since it has been proved to influence repurchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth (Newman *et al.*, 1998; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Bambale & Goni (2017) also commented that satisfied customers are usually retained and probably remain loyal to the firms while dissatisfied customers turn to other firms that are able to offer them services or products that will satisfy their needs and aspirations.

As noted by He *et al.* (2012), satisfaction occurs when the brand's performance meets the expectations of the customer.

• **Customer Trust and Loyalty**

Customer trust is fundamentally defined by researchers as the willingness to rely on a firm (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Chinomona, 2016). According to Pavlouet *al.* (2007) and Frassetet *al.* (2017), the significant role of trust is to decrease risks and uncertainty both in the quality of the seller and quality of the product or service.

Prior research revealed that consumers' trust in a brand has a significant influence on purchasing and positive brand referral intentions (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). As a consequence, trust has been regarded as a key antecedent for the development of customer attachment (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Erciet *al.*, 2012).

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H₁:** Human resources have a significant effect on the customer experience.
- H₂:** Customer experience has a significant effect on the customer satisfaction.
- H₃:** Customer experience has a significant effect on the customer trust.
- H₄:** Customer satisfaction and customer trust have significant effects on the customer loyalty.

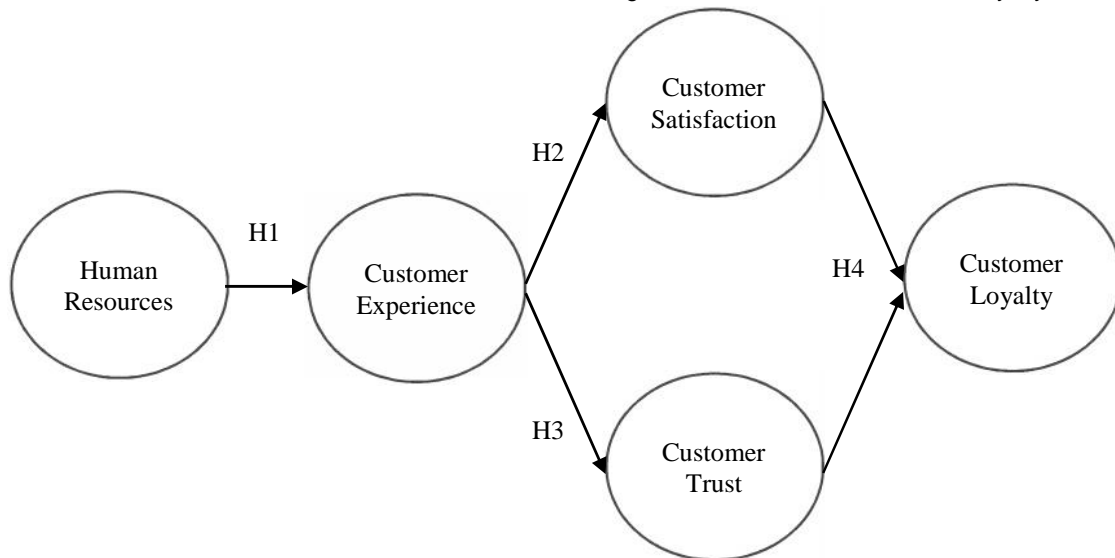


Figure I: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This research is intended to investigate how human resources impact the behaviors of customers. These behaviors include customer satisfaction, customer trust, and customer loyalty. The researcher uses a quantitative approach to analyze the data.

As the survey targets to inpatients and outpatients of healthcare facilities in Thailand, the researcher thus chooses Thai and foreign patients who live in Bangkok as the sampling unit.

The online questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Thai. It consists of three parts:

• **Part I Screening Questions**

The respondents were asked whether they have been residing in Bangkok for at least 6 months and have experienced getting medical treatment at any healthcare facility in Thailand.

- **Part II** Demographic profile of the sample, including nationality; gender; age; educational level; household income

The questionnaire also required respondents to specify the type of healthcare facility they visit quite often.

- **Part III Measurement of Independent and Dependent Variables**

This part contains 28 questions: 8 questions for human resources (selected and adapted from SERVQUAL scale by Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988); 3 questions for customer experience (adapted from brand experience scale by Brakuset *et al.*, 2009); 4 questions for customer satisfaction (adapted from customer satisfaction scales by Dimitriadis, 2006; Levesque & McDougall, 1996); 5 questions for customer trust (adapted from customer trust scale by Ballester *et al.*, 2003); 8 questions for customer loyalty (adapted from customer loyalty scales by Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Oliver, 1999). The items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". To cross-check answer validity, reverse coded items are included in the questionnaire.

Due to time constraints, this research applied snowball sampling method. Two social networking platforms, Facebook and Line, were selected as major channels to gather data.

Results

The researcher contributed the questionnaire to 434 participants and obtained 400 valid responses.

Table I: Demographic Information

Item	Frequency	%	Item	Frequency	%
Nationality			Education Level		
Thai	378	94.5	Below high school	2	0.5
Non-Thai	22	5.5	High school or equivalent	21	5.25
Gender			Bachelor's degree	255	63.75
Male	175	43.75	Master's degree	117	29.25
Female	225	56.25	Doctoral degree	5	1.25
Age			Household Income (monthly)		
15-23 years	55	13.75	Less than 30,000 baht	90	22.5
24-32 years	206	51.5	30,001-60,000 baht	100	25
33-41 years	24	6	60,001-100,000 baht	70	17.5
42-50 years	37	9.25	More than 100,000 baht	140	35
51-59 years	54	13.5	Type of Healthcare Facility		
60 years and above	24	6	Public hospital	128	32
			Private hospital	265	66.25
			Clinic	5	1.25
			Other	2	0.5

From Table I, the sample composed of Thai 94.5% (378 people) and non-Thai 5.5% (22 people). 43.75% of the respondents (175 people) are men and 56.25% (225 people) are women. As of ages, half of the participants (51.5%) are 24-32 years old. In terms of education level, the participants who currently hold a bachelor's degree (63.75%) and master's degree (29.25%) are two dominant groups. The majority group of the respondents (35%) having a household income of more than 100,000 baht per month. Lastly, private hospitals appeared to be the most frequent visited type of healthcare facility among 400 participants, which accounted for 66.25%, while 1.25% of the respondents usually went to clinics and 0.5% of the respondents chose other types of healthcare facilities.

To measure the reliability of the research instrument, the researcher used Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the internal consistency of the measuring scale.

Table II: Reliability Test

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Human Resources	8	.907
Customer Experience	3	.912
Customer Satisfaction	4	.935
Customer Trust	5	.778
Customer Loyalty	8	.872

According to Bland & Altman (1997), values of 0.7 or higher are regarded as satisfactory. The result showed that the questionnaire reached acceptable reliability, $\alpha = 0.91, 0.91, 0.94, 0.78,$ and $0.87,$ respectively, as presented in Table II.

Please find descriptive statistics of each research variable below as support of hypotheses testing results.

Table III: Descriptive Statistics

Item		Mean	SD
Human Resources			
HR1	Healthcare providers of this hospital/clinic are well dressed and appear neat	4.56	.594
HR2	Healthcare providers of this hospital/clinic are polite	4.27	.777
HR3	Healthcare providers of this hospital/clinic are professional	4.40	.649
HR4	I am impressed with the healthcare providers	4.19	.795
HR5	I receive prompt services from the healthcare providers	3.81	1.083
HR6	Healthcare providers are always willing to help customers	4.22	.784
HR7	I feel safe in my medical treatment with the healthcare providers	4.36	.693
HR8	Healthcare providers get adequate support from the hospital/clinic to do their jobs well	4.18	.773
Customer Experience			
CX1	The hospitalization experience at this hospital/clinic is favorable	4.24	.795
CX2	I had good feelings because of my interaction with the healthcare providers	4.16	.873
CX3	I'm satisfied with the overall service encounter at this hospital/clinic	4.19	.824
Customer Satisfaction			
CS1	My choice to go to this hospital/clinic was a wise one	4.15	.834
CS2	This hospital/clinic meets my expectations	4.14	.814
CS3	Overall, I'm satisfied with this hospital/clinic	4.19	.771
CS4	The overall quality of the service provided by this hospital/clinic is excellent	4.10	.836
Customer Trust			
CT1	I feel confident in this hospital/clinic	4.27	.758
CT2	This hospital/ clinic never disappoints me	4.05	.918
CT3	This hospital/clinic would be honest and sincere in addressing my concerns	4.18	.783
CT4	I could rely on this hospital/clinic to provide medical treatment	4.27	.776
CT5	This hospital/clinic is unreliable (reversed)	4.08	1.321
Customer Loyalty			
CL1	I prefer this hospital/clinic above others	3.82	.999
CL2	Overall, I go to this hospital/clinic most often	4.14	.950
CL3	This is the only hospital/clinic that I will choose	3.14	1.246
CL4	When I go to hospital/clinic, I don't even notice competing providers	3.14	1.211
CL5	I'm thinking of visiting other providers (reversed)	2.99	1.108
CL6	I'll tell other people how good this hospital/clinic is	3.75	.967
CL7	I'll recommend this hospital/clinic to other people	3.81	.952
CL8	I'm willing to pay higher price to go to this hospital/clinic	3.40	1.199

According to Table III, Despite CL2 "Overall, I go to this hospital/clinic most often" had the highest mean of 4.14 and the patients tend to generate positive WOM about the particular healthcare facilities (CL6 "I'll tell other people how good this hospital/clinic is" and CL7 "I'll recommend this hospital/clinic to other people"), some respondents still hesitate and consider visiting other hospitals/clinics, as we can see from the results of CL3 "This is the only hospital/clinic that I will choose", CL4 "When I go to hospital/clinic, I don't even notice competing providers", and CL5 "I'm not thinking of visiting other providers", showing means of 3.14, 3.14, and 2.99, and standard deviations of 1.246, 1.211, and 1.108, respectively.

For hypotheses testing, the single linear regression analysis was executed to test *H1*, *H2*, and *H3*, while the multiple linear regression technique was used to test *H4*.

Table IV: Linear Regression Analysis

	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
Dependent variable: Customer Experience Predictor: Human Resources	.877	.768	.768	.877	36.342	.000
Dependent variable: Customer Satisfaction Predictor: Customer Experience	.896	.803	.802	.896	40.236	.000
Dependent variable: Customer Trust Predictor: Customer Experience	.743	.553	.552	.743	22.179	.000
Dependent variable: Customer Loyalty Predictor 1: Customer Satisfaction*	.757	.574	.572	.652	11.923	.000
Dependent variable: Customer Loyalty Predictor 2: Customer Trust*	.757	.574	.572	.126	2.308	.021
* Tolerance = .359, VIF = 2.789						

As presented in Table IV, all predictions are significant ($p < 0.05$). The results showed that human resources has a significant effect on customer experience ($R^2 = 0.768$, Sig. = 0.000). And customer experience does affect predictors of customer loyalty, namely customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.802$, Sig. = 0.000) and customer trust ($R^2 = 0.552$, Sig. = 0.000).

Table IV also illustrates that the strongest path is the effect of customer experience on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.896$). The effect of human resources on customer experience is also significant ($\beta = 0.877$).

Regarding collinearity statistics of the multiple linear regression analysis (H_4), there is no multicollinearity problem in the model ($VIF < 5$). According to the result, customersatisfaction has more effect on customer loyalty than customer trust, with a beta value of 0.652 and 0.126, respectively.

Table V: Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Result
H_1 : Human resources have a significant effect on the customer experience	Supported
H_2 : Customer experience has a significant effect on the customer satisfaction	Supported
H_3 : Customer experience has a significant effect on the customer trust	Supported
H_4 : Customer satisfaction and customer trust have significant effects on the customer loyalty	Supported

Discussion

An analysis from a sample of 400 respondents was conducted by implementing a linear regression model. The result of H_1 has proved the previous research suggesting that CRM practices affect customer experience (Ejazet *et al.*, 2013). According to this research, healthcare providers, human resources of the healthcare facilities, have a significant effect on patient experience. Regarding the effects of customer experience, H_2 and H_3 were significant, indicating that the overall service encountered at the healthcare facilities accounts for the satisfaction and trust of the patients. Additionally, using multiple linear regression analysis to test H_4 , we found that both customer satisfaction and customer trust has a significant effect on customer loyalty, but in different degrees. This gave us a new perspective on patient loyalty in the context of Thailand's medical industry. To become loyal and attached to a hospital or clinic, patients are not only satisfied with the service quality, but, in some extent, they are willing to rely on the healthcare specialists of the particular facilities. In summary, all four hypotheses are supported, confirming that human resources do impact customer loyalty by having customer experience, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty as the mediator variables.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nowadays, the success of any company is highly dependent on how consumers are served. A past study suggested that the ability of organizations to compete in the marketplace could rely on the quality of their human resource systems (Lado & Wilson, 1994). The results of this research have confirmed that human resources, as a part of customer relationship management, also play a crucial role in driving patient loyalty. Thus, for managerial implications, top management needs to pay more attention to healthcare providers and facilitate ways to interact with patients to get customer insights and enhance customer experiences over time, which, in turn, will result in customer satisfaction and customer trust and lead to customer loyalty. Also, for other service businesses, aiming to retain customers and build brand attachment, service providers should create a customer-centric culture and consider adopting CRM approaches to improve service quality and customer experience.

Limitations and Future Research

The statistical data and findings from this paper could be a reference for research on healthcare marketing. However, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of this study. This research only tests the mediating roles of customer satisfaction and customer trust, while there might be other possible determinants of customer loyalty. More importantly, as the data used in this research was collected in November 2019, the results may differ in the future. Also, the results from the survey revealed that even though satisfaction and trust affect the loyalty of the patients, but it is possible that they will visit other healthcare facilities. Deeper information may have been obtained by conducting a focus group interview. Lastly, since the questionnaire was only distributed to patients of medical facilities in Thailand, the generalization of these findings may be debatable. A sample with more diversity would have benefited the results.

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