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"BUILDING BONDS: KEY DRIVERS OF PATIENT LOYALTY IN HEALTHCARE": A MINI-REVIEW

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Abstract:
Introduction: *The hospital environment is characterized by increased competition, accelerated development of medical technologies, greater complexity and technicality of care, as well as increased patient demands. To meet these demands, hospitals must provide quality care that meets patients' needs and expectations. They must also develop long-term relationships with their patients to create a bond of trust and loyalty.*
Objective: *This work aims to synthesize the factors affecting patient loyalty in hospitals and to identify possible areas for improvement.*
Results: *The determinants of a patient's loyalty in a hospital start with the management approach and patient satisfaction, the service quality and the brand image of the hospital, and include hospitality services, visibility of the hospital, communication and confidentiality, reputation and availability of doctors, nursing care, and leadership and the relationships between doctors, nurses, and patients. In addition to health care services that comprise administrative procedures and support programs for patients and families, artificial intelligence and diagnostic platforms have been highlighted as principal factors affecting patient loyalty and trust. Marketing in the healthcare sector can affect patient trust, and demographic and psychosocial profiles of patients also influence patient loyalty.*
Each factor can affect patient loyalty in a hospital to a specific degree.
Although classic patient loyalty programs exist in some hospitals, inspired by other sectors, they are part of rather patient retention strategies and lack specificity and connection to factors influencing loyalty behavior.
Conclusion: *Measurement and analysis of the impact of determinants of patient loyalty in hospitals improves the performance of healthcare providers and hospital profitability.*

Keywords: "*patient loyalty", "patient satisfaction", "service quality", "continuous improvement".*

1. Introduction

Hospitals are among the healthcare companies that require devoted customers and are constantly striving to enhance their high-quality services in order to attract new customers, retain current ones, and even draw in business from rivals. Consequently, in order to remain viable, appealing, and competitive, hospitals must address a variety of challenges, among them patient loyalty [1].

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Patient loyalty in hospital is a crucial component of healthcare management that affects patient health outcomes, the performance of healthcare staff, as well as hospital profitability. In order to retain patients, hospitals have to implement effective strategies that must be based on an extensive understanding of the loyalty process, an awareness of the elements that affect patient loyalty, and, consequently, a comprehension of the needs and expectations of patients.

From a historical point of view, in the field of healthcare management, three key periods can be identified regarding patient loyalty. The first period, prior to the 1980s, focused primarily on enhancing customer satisfaction. During this time, patient loyalty was defined in terms of repetitive consumption of healthcare services, and the focus was only on the services. The second period, between 1980 and 1990, served as a pivotal transition. The quality of the patient's experience became central to the relationship between patient and healthcare organizations. Understanding and measuring service quality marked a significant milestone in patient loyalty. This led to a more systematic study and measurement of patient loyalty, facilitating a continuous improvement process aimed at identifying and enhancing the factors that influence patient experiences and, improving their loyalty [2]. Finally, after 1990, patient loyalty has evolved into a strategic focus for healthcare organizations. The concept of loyalty is examined as a process enabling managers to make strategic decisions aimed at enhancing management practices and retaining patients [3,4].

This research paper aims to review the determinants of patient loyalty in hospitals, enabling, at a later stage, the development of tools and methodologies for the effective measurement and enhancement of patient loyalty in a healthcare system.

2. Management approach

2.1 Customer satisfaction-based management

A management approach based on customer satisfaction prioritizes meeting and exceeding customer expectations as the primary goal of business operations. This approach ensures that all organizational processes, strategies, and decisions revolve around delivering value to customers, enhancing their experience, and building long-term relationships. This management approach can have a direct impact on customer loyalty. In this traditional approach, customer satisfaction is an essential element serving as a crucial indicator of loyalty, primarily viewed as a behavioral response rather than an attitude. Satisfaction is defined as the customer's perception of his own experience with a particular product or service, which can lead to enhanced recommendations and increased expenditure [5, 6, 7, 8]. Satisfaction has been described as a post-consumption evaluation derived from a comparison between a customer's expectations and the actual performance experienced [9]. This evaluation stems from the gap between initial expectations and perceived outcomes, leading to variability in satisfaction levels among individuals and potential changes in the same individual's satisfaction over time[10]. Customer satisfaction, which helps in monitoring and improving current and potential business performance, leads to customer loyalty, recommendations, and repeat purchases.

A customer satisfaction-based approach offers advantages such as enhancing customer loyalty and retention, fostering a positive brand reputation, achieving greater profitability through repeat business, and influencing competitive advantage in the marketplace.

In the hospital sector, patient satisfaction is the main determinant of hospital patient loyalty. Patient satisfaction refers to the degree of satisfaction a patient feels when the health service performs better than expected[11].Patient satisfaction is the connection between the quality of care and its trust levels[12].

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2.2 Customer-Relationship management

Another management approach has emerged, known as the customer-centric approach, which characterizes loyalty as a solid bond between a customer and a company. The customer is attached to the company by a relationship of trust and commitment based on positive and recurrent experiences [9]. Many researchers have developed the concept of the customer centric approach [13,14,15,16,17]. Philip Kotler defended the idea that customer relationship management is the key to success in today's world. He emphasized that businesses should focus on building enduring relationships with their customers, rather than simply attracting them by good service. This aligns with a quality-oriented approach and continuous improvement [16,18,19]. Frederick Reichheld insists on the perception of the customer as the key to success and not only the performance of services[20]. So, providing excellent customer service and sustaining loyalty requires efficient management of consumer complaints and comments. This approach to promoting customers' trust is carried out by listening to them in order to detect problems and solve them, as well as through taking proactive measures that preserve customer loyalty, trust, and the organization's reputation[21].

2.3 Loyalty leadership

Reichheld's six pillars of loyalty leadership provide a clear way to build a strong connection with customers, workers, and stakeholders. The main strategies include leading by example, valuing mutual benefits, emphasizing quality, making decisions faster, rewarding value over time, and promoting open and honest talks[22].This strategy in leadership can have an impact on patient loyalty. Leadership organization can enhance team performance and promote patient satisfaction[23].Organizational leadership by managing conflict between employees and customers can improve the quality of the customer-company relationship and lead to customer loyalty. Organizational leaders play a pivotal role in conflict management by fostering a positive work environment. Employee connections, followed by customer relationships and loyalty, can be greatly enhanced by early problem detection and prevention, such as spotting potential problems and taking proactive measures to resolve them [24].

Leadership in nursing is another key component. A significant association exists between leadership styles and higher patient satisfaction, lower medication errors, and lower hospital-acquired infections[25].

3. Corporate image in healthcare

Corporate image refers to how a healthcare organization is perceived by patients, stakeholders, and the public and it affects patient loyalty. The corporate image of a hospital is shaped by multiple factors, such as its brand reputation, quality of care, patient experience, the ethical standards, physical environment, and the community engagement.

The connection between brand reputation and patient loyalty is cyclical and synergistic. A strong brand reputation instills confidence, reduces perceived risk, and fosters trust—key precursors to loyalty. Positive brand perception is essential for enhancing patient loyalty. A good reputation can lead to trust and therefore a patient's adherence and therefore mitigate the impact of occasional service failures, as loyal patients tend to be more forgiving when trust has been established. To build a strong brand image, hospitals should focus on ensuring that their facilities, staff interactions, and quality of service are in line with what patients expect [26,27,28].

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Quality of care is the first and most important factor that determines patient trust, but it is not the only factor [29]. Providing a good and a satisfying service is beneficial for creating a brand image of the hospital, which is directly correlated to both patient satisfaction and loyalty[11].

The quality of services is a key component of loyalty. The improvement of perceived quality of service boosts patient satisfaction and raises the chances for patients to return to the hospital, fostering thus the patient's loyalty[30], [31]. Providing quality service, however, has been recognized as a fundamental strategy for achieving success and surviving the current competitive context, and it can strengthen the customer-provider relationship.

The loyalty driven by satisfaction is shaped by how patients perceive the value and quality of the services offered by the hospital [32]. Loyal patients who have positive experiences contribute to a hospital's brand equity through testimonials, social sharing, and high satisfaction scores. Studies have shown that hospitals with high patient satisfaction ratings often enjoy stronger reputations and better financial performance. Furthermore, trust, a key mediator in the relationship between loyalty and brand image, is positively impacted by brand image [33]. According to a study conducted in India, the dimensions of empathy, tangibility, and service quality indicate that a positive relationship and the quality of the service have no discernible effect on patient loyalty. Additionally, the same study found that gender had no effect on patient loyalty [34].

Ethical standards

Effective communication and patient experience have a positive and significant effect on patient loyalty with trust as mediation. Improving communication and patient experience can be done through increasing patient confidence in the services provided.

In today's healthcare world, communication is key to patient loyalty. Prioritizing confidentiality in communication practices is not only ethical but also strengthens patient loyalty in a competitive healthcare space. The privacy of the patient is an individual's right to express themselves selectively, share personal information, and make personal decisions without external interference.

Hospitality in healthcare refers to the overall experience a patient receives during their stay, encompassing not just medical care but also the environment and amenities that contribute to comfort and satisfaction. The establishment of hotel-like services in hospitals has arisen as one of the major driving forces for the improvement of patient loyalty and satisfaction. Hospital hotel services offer comfort, quality food, and considerate administrative services. These services with the medical services have a great impact on both the patient and families, giving them a great experience [35].In addition, creating a comfortable experience by targeting luxurious surroundings can increase the high quality of medical care [36].

Health care practitioners who adopt the most effective practice out of the hospitality sector, including the hospital facility's design and the introduction of hotel-like service, elevate the patients' experiences and, consequently, patients' satisfactions [37].

Geographic Accessibility, location, and affordability have an impact on patients' loyalty. Patients desire convenient access to healthcare without having to travel excessively and seek quality of healthcare at reasonable costs [32, 38, 39].

Community engagement and patient loyalty are intertwined, with effective engagement strategies leading to improved health outcomes and stronger patient-provider relationships. By addressing the challenges and leveraging diverse engagement mechanisms, healthcare systems can enhance their service delivery and foster a more patient-centered approach.

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Patient engagement in clinic management and decision-making, particularly through governing boards and patient advisory councils, contributes to quality improvement and patient satisfaction. These roles offer valuable insights into clinic programs and policies, enhancing patient loyalty[40].

4. Health care providers

Health care provider trust and commitment to the hospital are fundamental for patient adherence [41] . A study conducted in Indonesia found that trust and perceived risk do not have a significant impact on patient loyalty[42]. According to another Indonesian study, loyalty and service process are not significantly correlated. Service provider and service environment are two main factors that influence the service quality, which directly affects the behavioral loyalty of primary health care users [43].

Doctors have an important role in hospital patient loyalty. The beneficial effect of patient satisfaction on patient loyalty was demonstrated by a cross-sectional study that used a questionnaire to gather information from a number of patients undergoing outpatient treatment at a cardiovascular unit. This study showed that good communication is essential for enhancing hospital patients' satisfaction and loyalty to medical services and that managing and improving doctor-patient communication skills is essential [44]. Communication between the patient and the doctor is crucial to patient loyalty. It may, however, occasionally also act as a barrier to hospital loyalty. Because the patient feels devoted to the doctor, he can discontinue obtaining services from the hospital if the doctor is moved to another facility. A strong doctor-patient bond involves personalized care, which comes from knowing the patient's health history and personal background[45], to keep this relationship strong, doctors must balance what patients expect, which can change based on each person's character and idea of the perfect doctor.

Another study revealed the many sides of loyalty in doctor-patient relationships. For many families, the family doctor has been a symbol of loyalty across generations. The researchers found that trust is key to loyalty, often paired with active listening, attention, and high-quality care. However, since trust affects the patient's loyalty to the doctor, not the hospital, it does not always provide an advantage for the hospital. If the doctor is transferred to another hospital, the patient may be lost.

Also, a doctor's reputation can boost patient trust and satisfaction, which affects how loyal patients are. Akbolat in 2023 studied the effect of hospital reputation and doctor’s reputation on patient loyalty. The study's findings indicate that patient loyalty and hospital reputation are positively impacted by a doctor's reputation. However, patient loyalty is more impacted by hospital reputation than by doctor reputation. Though a doctor's reputation can shape both trust and satisfaction, influencing patient loyalty [46]. In Suki's study, a doctor's good name increases how satisfied and trusting patients are with their physician [47] . The supply of physicians, as well as their disposition toward patients, is of great importance [48].

In order to guarantee that patients receive the care they require and to avoid communication errors, care coordination can improve collaboration between the many healthcare professionals involved in patient care[49]. Eventually, an effective handoff between teams and an uncomplicated admission and discharge process contribute to patient retention[50].

Keeping patients aware of their medical data and managing sensitive medical files and diagnostic results while respecting information safety and confidentiality builds trust between healthcare providers and patients and therefore loyalty[51].

Building a culture of trust, which is the cornerstone of patient retention and plays a significant role in loyalty, requires transparency in management and communication of medical data [52]. Transparency in healthcare is increasingly recognized as an element of importance to customer and

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patient loyalty. It includes transparent communication about therapeutic procedures, possible results, and constraints of confidentiality. Achieving transparency in communication promotes loyalty [53]. Patients are more likely to trust their care provider and feel satisfied with the treatment they received as they become more knowledgeable, involved, and engaged in their own care[54]. Hospitals may assist their patients in better understanding the disease they are suffering from so that they can take charge of their own health and lower their chance of needing to be readmitted[55].

The initial impression that patients make of healthcare providers has an effect on patient loyalty in hospitals. Nurses' personalities and availability have a significant impact on patient loyalty. M. Sarmad studied in 2016 the impact of nurses' personality on patients' satisfaction and found that nurses personality traits result in patients' satisfaction. Strong connections between nurses and patients and correspondingly high-quality nursing care increase patient loyalty[56]. Yudhawati's research demonstrated a direct correlation between the quality of nursing care and patients' general levels of satisfaction, loyalty, and happiness[57]. Patients who receive better nursing care are more likely to remain loyal, which emphasizes the need to provide positive experiences for patients in order to foster their loyalty. Building trust between patients and hospitals is significantly impacted by the quality of nursing care provided. This includes the nurse's level of skill, their capacity to communicate effectively with patients, their respect for their privacy and choices, their ability to assist in relieving pain and symptoms, their willingness to provide emotional support and comfort, their readiness to continue providing care, and their promptness in responding to patients' needs. Additionally, their dependability is crucial. A multicenter cross-sectional survey conducted in three hospitals in China on 1469 inpatients revealed that there were significant direct and indirect effects between patient experience with nursing care and patient loyalty. Patient experience with nursing care had a direct and positive impact on patient loyalty, and better patient experience with nursing care was directly associated with better patient loyalty. Other factors related to a good quality of the nurse-patient relationship, such as communication, integrity, empathy, respect for privacy and autonomy of nurses, pain management, a warm welcome for the patient, and an adequate number of nurses and doctors, contribute to an improvement of the overall patient experience, playing an important role in patient loyalty [58].

5. Health care services

The hospital's atmosphere, the frequency and availability of doctor visits, and the ease of accessing healthcare are the primary factors that impact the quality of service [43], [59]. In addition, health care services, including laboratory and diagnostic care, have a significant and positive effect on patient satisfaction and loyalty[60].

Artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance healthcare diagnosis and strengthen patient loyalty by customizing experiences, boosting satisfaction, and promoting trust between patients and hospitals. By collecting and analyzing data, AI can improve the customization of the patient experience [61]. By attempting to follow human thinking processes, artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the healthcare sector. AI has the potential to revolutionize many aspects of medical practice due to the proliferation of healthcare data and improvements in analytic methods. The present and future applications of AI in healthcare are examined in a research paper in 2017. Both organized and unstructured healthcare data are the main focus, with a particular emphasis on the application of AI methods like natural language processing and machine learning in the treatment of serious diseases like cancer, neurology, and cardiology [62]. AI may enhance patient-physician relationships, which in turn may increase patients' trust in the hospital and healthcare system. Advanced AI technology could increase medical care's accuracy and efficiency. One of the most important aspects of healthcare is the therapeutic relationship

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between the patient and the clinician[63]. Artificial Intelligence (AI) can help make healthcare safer by lowering the number of bad outcomes and improving early detection, especially in areas where current methods aren't very effective[64].

Factors like administrative procedures, information, environment, location and the notification time of results play a key role in patients' levels of satisfaction and loyalty[65]. Hospitals can establish peer support programs for patients and their families, providing social and emotional support to help patients cope with their illnesses [51] .

6. Socio-psycho-demographic characteristics and visibility

Sociodemographic factors—such as age, education, sex, profession, and marital status—along with visibility play a critical role in shaping patient loyalty. Understanding these characteristics allows healthcare providers to tailor their marketing strategies and communication to meet patients' specific needs and preferences.

Patient demographics and psychographics are factors that influence the patient's loyalty. The weight of these variables is age, education, sex, profession, and marital status. These elements may impact on the loyalty of the patient. Additionally, psychological factors may influence patients' experience and loyalty by stress, anxiety, and perceived level of empathy. Description of these factors may enable a hospital to strategically make a decision regarding loyalty and better serve the needs of the patients[67,68].

Meanwhile, the visibility of a hospital, reflected through a strong and recognizable logo, a user-friendly website, and an active social media presence, enhances the hospital's perceived professionalism and reliability and determines that patients are more committed to their healthcare team[69]. Effective visibility strategies can attract diverse patient populations and engage them meaningfully through digital channels. By fostering strong relationships through visibility and addressing the unique expectations of various sociodemographic groups, hospitals can significantly boost patient loyalty and satisfaction.

Many research studies focused on social media marketing activities demonstrated that creating meaningful relationships with consumers through digital channels is a cutting-edge method of advertising a brand and reaching large numbers of people. Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube) is a low-cost, easy-to-use platform that provides a direct link for a brand to its consumers [70].That is why the effectiveness of social media marketing to boost customer loyalty has been shown through measures like interactivity, informativeness, and personalization[71] . Sustained interaction via social media platforms enhances and sustains patient satisfaction by ensuring meaningful engagement across the continuum of care, aiming to build loyalty [72] . Marketing factors determine an outpatient's loyalty. This includes the price, products or services, promotion, process, and human resources. All these elements have a significant influence on a patient's loyalty. In consequence, an effective marketing strategy based on these factors can enhance patients' satisfaction and loyalty [1,73].

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Table 1: Determinants of patient loyalty in healthcare

Management approach	- Customer satisfaction-based management - Customer-Relationship management - Loyalty leadership
Corporate image in healthcare	- Brand reputation, - Quality of care, - Patient experience, - Ethical standards, - Physical environment, - Community engagement
Healthcare providers	- Doctors: o Doctor's reputation o Doctors-patient relationship: Communication- Personalized Care-Availability of doctor visits - Nurses: Personality- Empathy- Availability- Integrity- Autonomy- Quality of nursing care
Health care services	- Diagnostic platform - Artificial intelligence - Peer support program
Sociodemographic characteristics and visibility	- Patients' demography and psychological profile - Visibility: Logo- web site - social media

7. Conclusion

Patient loyalty is a critical asset for healthcare institutions, offering a foundation for sustained competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive environment. The research identifies various interrelated factors that influence patient loyalty, including management strategies, patient satisfaction, service quality, and the overall brand image of the hospital. A management approach centered on customer satisfaction not only fosters a deeper understanding of patients' needs but also enhances their experiences and strengthens their loyalty.

Hospitality in healthcare refers to the overall experience a patient receives during their stay, encompassing not just medical care but also the environment and amenities that contribute to comfort and satisfaction. The corporate image of a hospital, shaped by its brand reputation and quality of care, plays a significant role in influencing patient loyalty. A strong brand reputation instills confidence, reduces perceived risk, and fosters trust—key precursors to loyalty. Positive perceptions of the brand enhance patient loyalty, as satisfied patients contribute to a hospital's brand equity through positive word-of-mouth and high satisfaction scores.

Moreover, the quality of services rendered—including healthcare delivery and supportive services—plays a pivotal role in establishing trust and enhancing patient satisfaction. As hospitals strive to meet rising expectations, they must ensure that service delivery—including hospitality aspects—meets or exceeds patient expectations. The integration of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and patient engagement tools, can significantly improve decision-making processes, further reinforcing patient trust and loyalty.

Sociodemographic factors—such as age, education, sex, profession, and marital status—along with visibility play a critical role in shaping patient loyalty. Understanding these characteristics allows

healthcare providers to tailor their marketing strategies and communication to meet patients' specific needs and preferences. Meanwhile, the visibility of a hospital, reflected through a strong and recognizable logo, a user-friendly website, and an active social media presence, enhances the hospital's perceived professionalism and reliability. Effective visibility strategies can attract diverse patient populations and engage them meaningfully through digital channels. By fostering strong relationships through visibility and addressing the unique expectations of various sociodemographic groups, hospitals can significantly boost patient loyalty and satisfaction.

Effective communication and a culture of transparency are fundamental in nurturing long-lasting relationships with patients. Confidentiality and respect for patient privacy contribute to a trusting environment, pivotal for fostering loyalty.

In essence, this mini-review highlights that patient loyalty is not merely a transactional phenomenon; it represents a long-term commitment benefiting both patients and healthcare providers. Developing robust patient loyalty programs focused on genuine relationships rather than short-term retention tactics can lead to improved health outcomes, higher satisfaction ratings, and ultimately, enhanced profitability for healthcare institutions.

Consequently, healthcare leaders are encouraged to adopt a holistic approach to managing patient loyalty by continuously analyzing patient feedback, adapting to market changes, and innovating care delivery processes. Investing in the factors that contribute to patient loyalty is not just a strategy for retention; it is a pathway toward excellence in healthcare delivery that aligns closely with the overarching goal of improving patient outcomes and overall community health.

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