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ASSOCIATION BETWEEN THE LEVEL OF CARE OF SERVICE PROVIDERS AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC HOSPITALS IN NAROK COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT
A nation's healthcare system necessitates special attention from the government since good healthcare guarantees a healthy population, which advances national development. Despite the Kenyan government efforts to enhance the quality of healthcare through policy enactment, public healthcare facilities often face a lack of trust from patients regarding the quality of care received. This study therefore focused on assessing whether there is an association between the level of care of service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok County, Kenya. The study was guided by the Disconfirmation Theory. Employing a stratified random sampling method, 30% of the patient population was surveyed, resulting in a sample size of 1,203 respondents. Primary data was collected using researcher-administered questionnaires, which were pretested for reliability and validity. The gathered data was analyzed using inferential statistics with the aid of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 27). The study employed multiple linear regression to determine the relationship between the level of care and customer satisfaction. Findings revealed that the average level of care was 4.305 for private providers and 4.079 for public providers, suggesting that private providers generally offer a higher standard of care. This difference was statistically significant, indicating that a higher level of care is associated with increased customer satisfaction. The study concludes that the level of care is a critical factor influencing patient satisfaction in both private and public hospitals in Narok County. To enhance patient satisfaction and trust in healthcare services, it is recommended that policymakers focus on improving the quality of care provided across all healthcare facilities. Future research could examine additional factors like provider communication skills, cultural competence, technological advancements, and urban-rural differences to better understand variables affecting patient satisfaction.

KEYWORDS: *Level of Care, Customer Satisfaction, Healthcare Quality, Private Hospitals, Public Hospitals.*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The quality of healthcare services is essential for ensuring positive patient outcomes and fostering trust in health systems globally (United Nations, 2021). Quality care encompasses the degree to which health services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of desired health outcomes and are consistent with current professional knowledge (World Health Organization, 2020). Patient satisfaction is recognized as a vital measure of healthcare quality and an integral component of the patient experience, influencing treatment adherence and overall health outcomes (Davis et al.,2020). Research indicates that patients who are satisfied with their healthcare providers are more likely to follow medical advice and maintain follow-up appointments, underscoring the critical role of quality service in achieving health goals (Chow et al., 2022).

The significance of quality healthcare services is underscored by the increasing demands of patients for responsive and effective healthcare systems (Bates et al.,2019). Globally, there is a growing consensus that healthcare providers must align their services with patient expectations, which continuously evolve with advancements in medical technologies and treatment protocols (Koehler et al., 2020). Furthermore, patient satisfaction contributes to broader public health agendas by improving health outcomes and reducing healthcare costs. Satisfied patients utilize health

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services more efficiently, leading to lower rates of unnecessary hospitalizations (Hibbard et al.,2019). Thus, enhancing the quality of care and ensuring patient satisfaction are vital components of healthcare reform and public health initiatives.

In the African context, the quality of healthcare services remains a pressing challenge, with significant disparities in service delivery across the continent (Bolek et al.,). Low- and middle-income countries face unique obstacles, including limited resources and a shortage of skilled healthcare professionals, which hinder efforts to provide quality healthcare (Mishra et al.,2023). Studies have shown that while private healthcare providers often exhibit higher patient satisfaction levels, public healthcare facilities play a critical role in delivering essential services to underserved populations (Afulani et al., 2019). Addressing healthcare quality is vital for attaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3, which aims to ensure healthy lives for all (United Nations, 2021).

In Kenya, the healthcare system is characterized by a mix of public and private providers, facing unique challenges in delivering quality care across regions (Ministry of Health, 2022). Research indicates that while the private sector generally has more resources, public hospitals remain essential for many Kenyans, especially in rural areas (Khan et al.,2022). Disparities in healthcare quality and access significantly impact patient satisfaction and health outcomes. A recent study highlighted gaps in the availability of critical services in rural hospitals compared to urban counterparts, leading to lower satisfaction rates among patients seeking care (Gikonyo et al.,2023).

Narok County, like many other regions in Kenya, faces distinct challenges related to healthcare service delivery. The county's healthcare system must navigate issues such as resource allocation, staff shortages, and varying patient expectations (Kenya Health Information System, 2021). This study aims to assess whether there is an association between the level of care provided by service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok County, Kenya. By focusing on these factors, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform healthcare policy and practice, ultimately contributing to improved healthcare services and patient experiences in the region.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The quality of healthcare services is widely acknowledged as a vital determinant of patient satisfaction and overall health outcomes, essential for fostering trust in health systems (World Health Organization, 2021). In Kenya, despite ongoing efforts to enhance healthcare delivery, significant disparities persist in the quality of care provided across both public and private hospitals (Ng'ang'a et al.,2023). Recent studies indicate that while public hospitals are critical in serving a large segment of the population, patient satisfaction remains low, with many patients expressing dissatisfaction due to long waiting times and inadequate service delivery (Odhiambo et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the need to evaluate the current state of care quality and its direct impact on patient satisfaction, suggesting that the problem may extend beyond access to services to encompass the quality of care provided. Despite the importance of assessing quality of care, research focusing specifically on the association between service delivery and patient satisfaction in Kenyan hospitals is limited (Kiptoo & Mbevi, 2023). Previous studies have explored various dimensions of healthcare quality, such as accessibility and affordability, but have often overlooked the nuanced relationship between the quality of care and patient satisfaction in diverse healthcare settings (Afulani et al.,2023). The lack of empirical evidence addressing this gap raises concerns about the effectiveness of healthcare reforms aimed at improving patient experiences. Therefore, there is a pressing need for further research to investigate how variations in quality-of-care influence patient satisfaction across different hospital settings. To address this gap, this study aimed to assess the association between the level of care provided by service providers and customer satisfaction in both private and public hospitals in Narok County, Kenya. By examining these dynamics, the research sought to provide insights that can inform healthcare policy and practice, ultimately contributing to the improvement of healthcare services and patient satisfaction, particularly in Narok County, Kenya.

1.3 Research Objective

The study aimed at assessing whether there is an association between the level of care of service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok County, Kenya.

1.4 Research Hypothesis

H_0: There is no significant association between the level of care provided by service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok county, Kenya.

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H_1: There is a significant association between the level of care provided by service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok county, Kenya.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant importance for various stakeholders, including healthcare practitioners, policymakers, hospital administrators, and patients. By examining the relationship between the level of care and patient satisfaction, the research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding healthcare quality in Kenya. Policymakers can utilize the insights gained from this study to develop targeted interventions and strategies to enhance service delivery, particularly in public hospitals, which serve a large portion of the population.

Additionally, the findings will provide hospital administrators with evidence-based recommendations to improve patient care and address the factors influencing satisfaction levels. For healthcare practitioners, understanding the dynamics of care quality and patient perceptions can lead to improved clinical practices and patient engagement strategies. Ultimately, this study aspires to enhance the overall healthcare experience for patients in Kenya, specifically by assessing the implications of quality of care on patient satisfaction in Narok County.

2.1 DISCONFIRMATION THEORY

Disconfirmation Theory, rooted in the work of Richard Oliver in 1980, posits that customer satisfaction is determined by the comparison between expected and perceived performance of a service or product. This theory suggests that satisfaction arises when customers experience a positive disconfirmation—where the perceived service exceeds expectations—or a negative disconfirmation, where the service falls short. Thus, customer satisfaction is essentially a function of the gap between what customers anticipate and what they actually receive.

Numerous studies have provided empirical support for Disconfirmation Theory in various contexts, including healthcare. For instance, a study by Hsieh, Yang, and Wu (2020) found that patients who perceived their hospital services to exceed their expectations reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction, underscoring the importance of meeting or exceeding patient expectations in healthcare settings. In another study, Makarem, Askarany, and Khamis (2021) demonstrated that positive disconfirmation played a crucial role in enhancing patient satisfaction in outpatient clinics, suggesting that service providers can improve satisfaction by ensuring that their service delivery exceeds patient expectations. Additionally, a study by Alqadheeb et al. (2023) highlighted that patient who experienced services aligned with or exceeded their expectations showed greater loyalty to healthcare providers, emphasizing the long-term benefits of addressing the disconfirmation process effectively.

Despite its robust application, Disconfirmation Theory has some limitations. One major concern is the assumption that all customers have stable and well-defined expectations prior to experiencing a service. Research by Brunner et al. (2019) indicates that customer expectations can be shaped by various factors, including prior experiences, word-of-mouth, and marketing communications, which may not always be consistent or rational. Another limitation is discussed by Ladhari et al. (2022), who argue that the theory's primary focus on cognitive evaluations can overlook the emotional and contextual factors contributing to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, a study by Nguyen et al. (2023) suggests that customer satisfaction may also be influenced by external factors, such as socioeconomic status and cultural background, which can further complicate the straightforward application of Disconfirmation Theory in diverse populations.

In the context of the study objective “To assess whether there is an association between the level of care of service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Kenya,” Disconfirmation Theory offers valuable insights. By examining the expectations that patients hold regarding the quality of care and how these expectations compare to the actual service received, healthcare providers can better understand the dynamics influencing patient satisfaction. Identifying gaps in service delivery allows hospitals to implement targeted improvements, ensuring that patient expectations are met or exceeded. This understanding is crucial in both private and public hospitals, where patient expectations can vary based on previous experiences, healthcare access, and perceived service quality.

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2.2 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework was used to guide the study (Figure 2.1). The independent variable was the level of care provided by service providers, while the dependent variable was customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals.

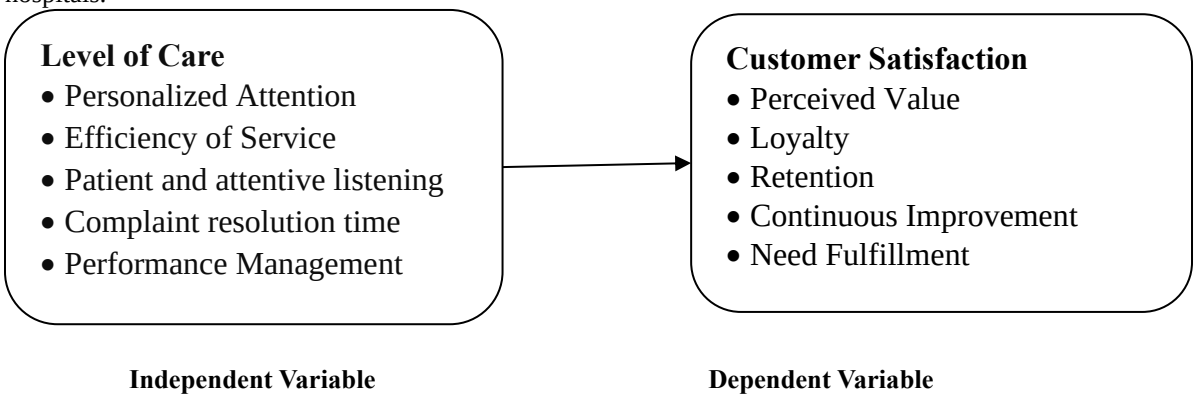


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

2.3 Level of Care of Service Providers and Customer Satisfaction in Private and Public Hospitals

Zhang and Li (2023) examined the relationship between the level of care provided by healthcare service providers and patient satisfaction across various hospital settings in China. The study specifically investigated variables such as the quality of interpersonal interactions, the responsiveness of healthcare staff, and the thoroughness of medical care. This research was carried out in several urban and rural hospitals across China, aiming to capture a comprehensive view of patient experiences in different healthcare environments. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, the study targeted a population of patients who had recently received care in these hospitals. A sample size of 700 patients was selected through stratified random sampling to ensure diverse representation. Data collection involved using structured questionnaires, which were designed to measure the level of care and satisfaction. The data analysis utilized multiple regression techniques to explore the impact of care quality on patient satisfaction. The findings revealed that higher levels of care, particularly in terms of staff responsiveness and medical thoroughness, were strongly associated with increased patient satisfaction. However, the study highlighted a gap in understanding how these factors vary across different healthcare systems, especially in less urbanized regions. The current study on the relationship between the level of care of service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok County intends to address this gap by focusing on rural healthcare settings in Kenya.

Rodriguez and Brown (2022) investigated the influence of care quality on patient satisfaction within the context of healthcare services in the United States. The study explored variables including the empathy shown by healthcare providers, the effectiveness of communication, and the overall care environment. Conducted in both public and private hospitals across several states, the study utilized a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of patient satisfaction. The target population comprised patients who had been treated in these hospitals within the last year. The research design included a sample size of 800 participants, selected through random sampling. Data were collected via detailed surveys and in-depth interviews to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights. Quantitative data were analyzed using structural equation modeling, while qualitative data were examined thematically. The study found that empathy and effective communication were significant predictors of patient satisfaction, with private hospitals often rated higher in these areas compared to public hospitals. The study identified a gap in how care quality impacts patient satisfaction in varying socio-economic contexts, particularly in underrepresented populations. The current study aims to fill this gap by examining the relationship between the level of care and customer satisfaction in the distinct context of Narok County, Kenya, thereby providing insights into healthcare quality in diverse settings.

In Africa, Moyo and Mwale (2021) did a study that focused on the impact of care quality on patient satisfaction in Zimbabwean hospitals. The research investigated variables such as the attentiveness of healthcare staff, the adequacy of medical treatments, and the overall hospital environment. This study was conducted in both public and private

hospitals in Harare, Zimbabwe, to assess how care quality influences patient perceptions. The study used a cross-sectional design with a target population of patients who had received care in these hospitals within the past six months. A sample size of 600 respondents was chosen through purposive sampling to ensure adequate representation from various hospital types. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The findings highlighted that attentiveness and the adequacy of medical treatments were crucial in determining patient satisfaction, with private hospitals generally providing higher levels of care. The study pointed out a significant gap in understanding how these factors influence satisfaction in rural versus urban healthcare settings. The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the relationship between the level of care and customer satisfaction in the specific rural context of Narok County, Kenya, contributing to a broader understanding of care quality impacts in diverse settings.

In Kenya, Karanja and Ndegwa (2022) investigated the relationship between care quality and patient satisfaction in Kenyan hospitals, focusing on variables such as the professionalism of healthcare staff, the responsiveness of services, and the adequacy of care provided. The research was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya, encompassing both private and public hospitals to offer a comparative perspective. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design, targeting a population of patients who had recently received treatment. A sample size of 500 patients was selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different hospital types. Data were collected using structured questionnaires, and the analysis was performed using statistical methods such as correlation and regression analysis to determine the relationship between care quality and patient satisfaction. The study found that professionalism and responsiveness were key factors influencing patient satisfaction, with private hospitals generally outperforming public ones in these areas. However, the study highlighted a gap in understanding how care quality affects patient satisfaction in rural versus urban settings. The current study aims to bridge this gap by examining the relationship between the level of care of service providers and customer satisfaction in both private and public hospitals in Narok County, thereby providing insights into how care quality impacts patient satisfaction in Kenya's rural healthcare environment.

3.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research utilized a descriptive cross-sectional design to collect data and measure relationships between service quality and customer satisfaction in public and private hospitals in Narok County, Kenya. The target population consisted of patients visiting two public hospitals (Narok County Referral Hospital and Ololulunga District Hospital) and two private hospitals (Shepherd Hospital and Medicatia Hospital), with a total daily patient count of approximately 9,600 (Research Data, 2024). The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula, resulting in 375 respondents from Narok County Referral Hospital, 32 from Ololulunga District Hospital, 286 from Shepherd Hospital, and 222 from Medicatia Hospital. Stratified sampling was used to ensure representation across three service categories: maternity, casualty, and outpatient services (Cooper & Schindler, 2019). Primary data were collected using structured interview-assisted questionnaires on a 5-point Likert scale to measure various dimensions of service quality and customer satisfaction (Lavrakas, 2012). The questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 patients from Cottage hospital who were not used in the final data collection to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions, which constitutes 10% of the intended sample size (Kothari & Garg, 2014). Validity was established through expert opinion, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding an average score of 0.8456, indicating strong reliability (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2020). Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS software, including correlation and regression analyses to examine the relationships between variables, with the significance level set at 0.05 (Aza et al., 2021). As well the assumptions of the linear regression model (Normality test, linearity test and autocorrelation test) were conducted using Kolmogorov Smirnov test, scatter plots and Durbin-Watson test respectively (Aisyah et al., 2021).

4.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LEVEL OF CARE OF SERVICE PROVIDERS AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC HOSPITALS IN NAROK COUNTY.

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between the level of care provided by service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals within Narok County. To address this objective, the study formulated the following null hypothesis:

H_{05}: *There is no relationship between the level of care of service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok County.*

The analysis employed a one-way ANOVA, the results of which are detailed in Table 4.21.

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Table 4.21: ANOVA Summary and Care Level Comparison

	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
Level of care by private providers	992	4271	4.305	0.620
Level of care by public providers	992	4046	4.079	0.621

ANOVA Results

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	25.51663	1	25.51663	41.10643	1.8E-10	3.846155
Within Groups	1230.318	1982	0.620745			
Total	1255.834	1983				

Source: Field data (2024)

The average level of care was found to be 4.305 for private providers and 4.079 for public providers. This suggests that, on average, private providers offer slightly higher levels of care compared to public providers. The computed F-statistic of 41.106 with an extremely low P-value (1.8E-10) indicates a significant difference in the level of care provided between private and public providers. The critical F-value (3.846) is much lower than the computed F-statistic, further confirming the statistical significance of this difference.

Based on these findings, the null hypothesis (Ho_1) that posited no relationship between the level of care of service providers and customer satisfaction in private and public hospitals in Narok County is rejected. The data strongly support the conclusion that there is indeed a significant difference in the level of care offered, with private providers generally offering a higher standard of care compared to their public counterparts. These findings align with studies by Xu et al. (2023) and Li and Wang (2022), who found that privately managed hospitals consistently outperformed public hospitals in patient care metrics, emphasizing better resource allocation and management practices in private healthcare settings. Further, these findings are consistent with the Disconfirmation Theory, which posits that customer satisfaction is influenced by the difference between expected and perceived service quality. In this context, patients may have higher expectations of care from private hospitals, and when these expectations are met or exceeded, it leads to greater satisfaction. Conversely, the expectations from public hospitals may not be as high due to prevailing perceptions about resource limitations and care quality, leading to different satisfaction outcomes.

However, these results differ from findings by Thompson, Smith, and Johnson (2021), who found no significant difference in patient satisfaction between public and private hospitals, suggesting that factors beyond care quality, such as affordability and accessibility, also influence patient perceptions. Additionally, research by Garcia and Diaz (2020) indicated instances where public hospitals, despite facing resource constraints, achieved comparable patient satisfaction levels by implementing innovative healthcare delivery strategies tailored to community needs. These nuances highlight the complexity of patient satisfaction and underscore the importance of considering various factors, including socio - economic dynamics and patient expectations, in the assessment of care quality across different healthcare settings.

5.1 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there is a significant association between the level of care provided by healthcare service providers and customer satisfaction in both private and public hospitals in Narok County, Kenya. Findings indicate that a higher level of care is associated with increased patient satisfaction, with private hospitals demonstrating slightly higher levels of care and corresponding satisfaction than public hospitals. This relationship underscores the importance of healthcare providers delivering consistent, high-quality care to foster positive patient outcomes and satisfaction. The study emphasizes the critical role that the level of care plays in enhancing the healthcare experience, particularly in contexts with varying resource allocations, as observed between private and public healthcare facilities.

5.2 The Study Contribution

This study offers a valuable contribution to the field of healthcare quality by specifically addressing the impact of care level on patient satisfaction within the healthcare system of Narok County, Kenya. While existing research often examines generalized healthcare quality factors, this study narrows its focus to assess how distinct care levels

influence customer satisfaction in both private and public settings. The findings are particularly relevant for stakeholders such as healthcare policymakers, hospital administrators, healthcare professionals, and community advocates, as they offer insights into strategies for improving service quality to meet patient expectations. By examining this relationship within the Kenyan healthcare context, the study fills a notable gap in literature, contributing to the evidence base required to inform healthcare policy, enhance patient satisfaction, and ultimately improve healthcare delivery systems in developing regions.

5.3 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, several policy recommendations are proposed to enhance patient satisfaction through improved care quality. Firstly, the government and health sector stakeholders should prioritize quality improvement initiatives within public hospitals, aiming to bridge the care quality gap between public and private facilities. Such initiatives may include training programs for healthcare providers to foster compassionate, attentive care and workshops on patient-centered practices. Additionally, policies encouraging public hospitals to adopt best practices observed in private facilities, such as reduced waiting times and personalized patient interactions, could elevate patient satisfaction levels. Collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international partners may further support these improvements, contributing to a more equitable healthcare system that aligns with patient expectations and enhances overall health outcomes.

5.4 Limitation of the Study

The study faced several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, non-cooperation from two hospitals reduced the intended sample size, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings. In response, the researcher collected additional data from the cooperative hospitals to compensate for the shortfall. Additionally, some patients were hesitant to participate fully due to concerns about data sensitivity. This challenge was addressed by assuring respondents of strict confidentiality measures, fostering a higher level of participation. Language barriers were also encountered, particularly among elderly and less-educated respondents. To mitigate this, interpreters assisted in clarifying survey questions, enabling more accurate data collection. Despite these limitations, the study employed a rigorous methodology to maintain the credibility and validity of its findings.

5.5 Areas for Further Study

Future research could explore additional factors influencing patient satisfaction, such as healthcare provider communication skills, cultural competence, and the role of technological advancements in service delivery. Studies might also consider comparisons across urban and rural hospital settings to capture a more comprehensive view of how contextual variables impact the care-satisfaction relationship.

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