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Evaluating the Impact of Preferential Treatment: The Mediating Role of Customer Entitlement and Its Consequences

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ABSTRACT

Preferential treatment of selected customers is one of the strategies employed by companies that aim to implement relationship marketing. The objective of the study is to determine the impact of customer entitlements on complaint behavior and customer incivility. The quantitative method was used to test the model. Total 350 questionnaires were distributed out of which 293 were received from respondents. Convenience sampling technique was used to collect data from customers. SPSS and AMOS software were used for data analysis. Demographic analysis and reliability analysis were performed using SPSS. CFA and SEM were used on AMOS software. The results show that customer entitlement has mediating role between preferential treatment, complaint behavior and customer incivility. Our findings specifically show that receiving preferential treatment can improve consumer satisfaction. Furthermore, the fact that we found a considerably higher degree of satisfaction in the non-unique over-reward condition than in the unique over-reward situation indicates that the way preferred treatment is allocated influences customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Preferential treatment, complaint behavior, customer incivility, customer entitlement

INTRODUCTION

Firms are putting efforts to attain its marketing objectives through customer attraction and customer retention. Customer attraction through surprise gifts and awards while customer retention through customer loyalty programs (Kim & Baker, 2020). Preferential treatment is acknowledged as one of the positive marketing

strategy in this competitive business world (Pontes, Vivian, Pontes & Nicolas, 2021). Companies are striving to provoke the customer loyalty by using such kind of techniques. This technique is often seen in hospitality and tourism industry where many customers are the part of loyalty programs (Kim & Baker, 2020). Such preferential treatment is attained via past purchase history (Drèze & Nunes, 2009). Giving some extra benefits to the selected segment of the customer as compare to the other customers is the main theme of preferential treatment tactics Pontes, Vivian, Pontes & Nicolas (2021) which makes the customer delight especially when received surprise rewards (Kim & Baker, 2020). In preferential treatment few customers are eligible to gain the special benefits like upgraded products, participation in exclusive events, special discounts, priority queues & boarding, home ticket deliveries which is actually beyond the firm's offerings (Lacey, Suh and Morgan, 2007) through different loyalty programs. According to Bond (2019), among Gen Z of 47% and 46% of Millennials even pay a subscription fees to gain the exclusive tier of customer's loyalty programs for extra ordinary benefits. In this way, these firms are in fact successful in satisfying the customer need for their status and distinctions (Drèze and Nunes, 2009).

Preferential treatment is considering an importance in relationship marketing, involves conceding special status and distinctive treatment to the special selected customers for the long-term stability of relationship between customers and company (Varela, Vázquez & Iglesias, 2010). In the result, company may gain satisfaction and sustainable loyalty from their customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). But the positive impact of preferential treatment is not significant (Yim et al., 2004) and sometimes found negative consequences (De Wulf & Odekerken-Schroder 2003). Therefore, such type of strategies is creating confusion in the minds of researchers and practitioners where many customers are sharing the same environmental conditions but many are treating in preferential way while the others are not may affect one another (Kim & Baker, 2020). Hence researchers have raised the questions on its negative consequences and its after effects on customer relationship strategy (Palmeira et al., 2016). This may raise injustice, dissatisfaction and lesser repurchase intentions (Polyakova, Estes & Ordanini, 2020). Although, dark side of the preferential treatment is still limited and demanding more attention (Pontes et. al, 2021; Kim & Baker, 2020).

Previous research has explored the negative behaviors of preferential treatment in terms of customer embarrassment & injustice while the entitlement sense of customers is ignored (Polyakova, Estes & Ordanini, 2020). This study is trying to extend the unattended angle of the preferential treatment, and considered customer entitlement as outcome of preferential treatment. Preferential treatment has raised the sense of special in customer's mind. (Wetzel et. al, 2014). This study is trying to interrogate whether the sense of entitlement may arise once the customer gets preferential treatment. These effects of customer entitlement might turn the customer adverse behaviors like customer incivility and complaint behaviors. Such connections between the preferential treatment and the customer adverse behaviors of incivility and complaint behaviors yet not explored.

Customer entitlement is one kind of customer-related stressor for the company

employees (Kim, Zhan, Hu & Yao, 2020) explaining customers expecting over attention, preferential rewards, and special treatment (Fisk & Neville, 2011). Customer entitlement derives from illegitimate personal superiority sense and inflated self-worth of the customers. Past literature depicts that individual dispositions play a central role in enactment of entitlement behavior in individuals (Jordan, Ramsay & Westerlaken, 2017). Entitled people are persistently self-focused (Moeller, Crocker & Bushman, 2009). Attitudes of entitled customers are demanding unlawful superiority sense which exaggerated self-worth and demanding such people for special treatment, extra considerations in company leverages and preferential rewards.

Customer entitlement is developed from the narcissism literature which is stranded in the construct of psychological entitlement (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Campbell et al., 2004). Boyd & Helms (2005) have defined customer entitlement as "The extent to which the buyer perceives himself or herself to be a special customer of the firm." Customer entitlement is conceptualize as a stable personality trait and mirrors customer tendency to have overall high expectations. Butori (2010) further describes the definition in a way, that customer entitlement has inclination to expect special treatment and expecting better than others (Ahmad, Bibi, & Imran, 2023).

Preferential treatment is usually given to the customers due to any criteria fix by the companies and treating them as special. This study suggests that if preferential treatment is given to the customers it may increase the intensity of entitlement. Thus, customer entitlement has been taken as an outcome of preferential treatment and can also act as a mediator between the preferential treatment and its outcomes (customer incivility and complaint behavior). This paper creates novelty in the consumer psychology literature to find out the preferential treatment may spread negativity once develop the entitlement sense among customers. This sense can ultimately produce negative behaviors in service encounters like incivility in customer's act and raise the complaint behavior as well.

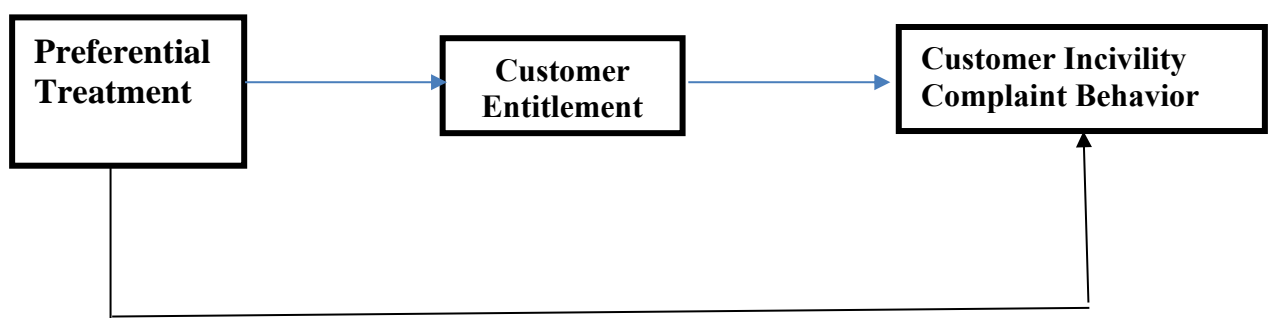


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Theory and Hypothesis

Social cognitive theory is taken to as overarching theory to best explain the conceptualizing the model of this study which is presented by Bandura in 1980. This theory entails the psychosocial factors of human behaviors, feelings and thoughts in identifying reciprocal three-way causation among individuals, environment and

behaviors. Behavioral, cognitive (personal) and environmental factors are continually intermixing each other and rendering the formation of human behaviors which is typically as reciprocal triadic relationship (Young, 2005). Basic ideology of SCT is the reciprocal determinism expecting a continuous and dynamic interlinking among the individual, behavior and environment. According to Bandura, these personal, environmental and behavioral components are inseparable therefore can't be examined individually (Phipps, 2013).

Early psychological theories were based on the behavioral principles consists of like input-output model emphasizing internal human factors embraces the behavioral outcomes (Bandura,2001). In this view, human behavior was shaped and controlled automatically and mechanically by environmental stimuli (Bandura, 2001). Environmental factors are the person's physical exterior factors which inspires or deject certain behaviors like family/ social criticism or support that can be social or physical. Family, co-workers and friends are of social environment whereas lightning of room, current weather conditions forms the physical environment. Reactions of people also arouses through the social environment (like in our case preferential treatment) (Bandura, 1986). Social influences are shaped and altered through beliefs, human expectations, cognitive competences and emotional bents which passes the information and emotional reactions are activated (Bandura, 1986), like preferential treatment earned by the customer from the company postulates impact on the customer's personal factors feeling entitled.

Reciprocal impact between Personal & Behavior imitates the interconnection between thoughts, affection and actions. ~~The P—B of reciprocal causation reflects the interaction between thought, affect and action.~~ Behaviors actually attains the shape and directions from beliefs, expectations, goals, intentions and self- perceptions. People behaves according to what they think, feel and believe. (Neisser, 1976; Bower, 1975; Bandura, 1986). Their cognitive patterns and emotions can be partially affects through extrinsic and natural effects of their actions. Thus, the personal factors (in our case customer entitlement) affects the behavior like customer incivility and complaint behavior.

Thus, customer with high entitlement usually have inflated view of their own capabilities (personal factors) (Snow et al., 2001) and this tendency aroused due to the socio environmental stimuli (preferential treatment). Highly psychologically entitled customers tend to blame others for negative outcomes (Harvey et al., 2014a,2014b). As the individuals usually involved in causal explanations of their own or others' behavior (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley & Michela, 1980). Thus, entitlement works as intervening variable in the relationship between preferential treatment and outcome (complaint behavior and customer incivility).

Preferential Treatment and Outcomes

Preferential treatment to the designated customers group is considered an important strategy of the relationship marketing. It is being used by the companies who really wants to implement the relationship marketing approach as preferential treatment is considered as stick to the relationship marketing. This allocates a special status to the group of customers for the stable and consistent relationship between the

dyadic parties (Lacey, 2007)

Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) found that preferential treatment comprises two components: economic and customization. Firstly, in economic-based preferential treatment, the former component describes the monetary value and/or time savings benefits that customers receive from engaging in marketing relationships (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner 1998). Secondly, customization-based preferential treatment describes customer benefits derived from customer's perceptions of personal recognition, extra attention, and specific services not available to regular customer (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner 1998). Preferential treatment positively related to customer's satisfaction (Raja, Raju, & Raja, 2021; Yim et al., 2004), commitment (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Lacey, 2007) and loyalty (Lacey, 2007). According to Pontes (2020), preferential treatment can generate the discomfort and negative outcomes, like in our case (customer incivility and complaint behavior).

Consumers respond in a negative manner if they treated less as compare to other groups (Raja, 2021; Lo et al., 2007). When a customer who has to wait because the service provider served a preferential customer first may experience greater feeling of customer incivility and complaint behavior. This clearly reflects that individuals receiving preferential treatment are likely to have lesser complaint behavior and customer incivility. Therefore, the preferential treatment will lead to behavioral outcomes.

H1: Preferential treatment is negatively related to (a) customer incivility and (b) complaint behaviour.

Preferential Treatment and Customer Entitlement

Term "entitlement" has a noteworthy historical evidence and specific definitions in social science disciplines like political science, law and philosophy etc. All disciplines are agreed on the definition of the entitlement as the perceptions of individuals they deserve. According to the discipline of law, as if something is owned by law is not been returned back without the legal proceedings (Raja, 2022; Black's Law Dictionary, 1990). Subsequently, entitlement is dichotomous that is individual has the ownership of property or not, and in disagreement case is resolved by the legal systems. Entitlement construct has been used by the philosophers a broad sense. Entitlement theory postulates the convinced undeniable rights like right of freedom, health etc. (Nozick, 1974). Nozick emphasized that entitlement is a historical theory ad distributive justice is established. Some other philosophers argue about the individual entitlement to basic needs like individuals viewed themselves as entitled to food in case of hunger (O'Neill, 1994). Similarly, in political sciences democracy is being treated as global entitlement which refers to free expression, participatory government and self-determination (Franck, 1992). In social sciences, entitlement is resulting from exchange (Rawls, 1971). Researchers defining employee entitlement as the deservingness of preferential treatment and rewards (Harvey & Martinko, 2009)

Preferential treatment consists of two elements that are one is economic and other is customization. Economic based preferential treatment, relates to the benefits of money and/or time savings which customers receives in marketing relationship tactics (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner 1998). Service upgrades, discounts, certificates,

complimentary products or services are the examples of economic based treatments. Preferential treatment tends to evoke in customers a sense that they are special (Wetzel et al., 2014), Preferential treatment is somewhat intermittent, beneficiaries of such treatments may typically feel generates the feeling of special having superiority feelings (Pontes, 2020), potentially leading them to infer that they deserved the preferential treatment all along. Based on this theoretical review and discussion, it is hypothesized as:

H2: Preferential treatment is positively related to customer entitlement.

Customer Entitlement and Outcomes

Customer entitlement can be explained as hostile behavior and its outcomes are aggressiveness, workplace harassment and revenge (Fisk & Neville, 2011). Literature is evident about the different outcomes of customer entitlement in various studies separately like decreased perceived fairness (Xia & Kukar-Kinney, 2013), weaken profitability (Wetzel et. al, 2014), increased complaint behavior (Zboja et. al, 2015) and high reward expectations & larger voiced complaints (Li et. al, 2017). This study is also conceptualizing the outcomes of customer entitlement in the same way under the lens of social cognitive theory. Therefore, customer entitlement has been theorized between customer entitlement determinants and the outcomes (Khan, Sarfraz, & Tabassum, 2020; Khan, Sarfraz, & Afzal, 2019).

Incivility decreases the working efficiency and disengages the working environment that's the reason it is not a personal issue (Nawaz, et al., 2024; Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000). According to one study, 327 front line employees surveyed faced incivility behavior in three years. In another study 600 nurses surveyed and one third found mistreated at workplace (Azhar, 2024). Hence incivility is prevailing phenomena at workplaces especially in services environment. Andersson and Pearson (1999) explains incivility as "low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect". This definition points out that incivility in interpersonal, one is committer (the person being uncivil) and other one is subject (the person noticing the incivility). Incivility not only occur between employee to employee but it can also be observed in customer to employee interactions (Sliter, Jex, Wolford & McInnerney, 2010). In our case, customer is perpetrator and employee as target. Customer incivility is an emerging construct and rarely used in the literature (Sliter, Jex, Wolford & McInnerney, 2010).

Customer incivility is harmful for both the individuals and organization (Itzkovich & Heilbrunn, 2016). It indicates adverse relationship between incivility and physical well-being and impacts on psychological dispassion and relaxation after work (Nicholson & Griffin, 2015). Wilson and Holmvall (2013) enlists the uncivil behaviors includes peevish about slow service, blaming employees in failure cases, inappropriate handling with employees, raise complaints on product or service values etc. Itzkovich and Heilbrunn (2016) conducted study to explore the relationship of solidarity, incivility and deviant behavior, and found that lesser co-worker solidarity produces the incivility behavior (Sarfraz, & Tabassum, 2020; Khan, Sarfraz, & Tabassum, 2020; Khan,).

Customer incivility has become a pervasive phenomenon in the business world (Wen, 2018), and still need to explore its causes (Torres et. al, 2017; Wen, 2018). In the study of (Fisk & Neville, 2011; Boyd & Helms, 2005), service employees serving the entitled customers may face the negative impressions like feelings of dehumanization (incivility). Literature is evident that customers evaluate employees as inferior while comparing themselves with different individual (employees). Zboja et.al (2016) also illustrates there is a potential possibility of entitled customers may have negative outcomes like customer incivility when interact with employees. Wen (2018) states the famous slogan “Customer is king” or the “Customer is always right” in his study. Due to such priorities for the customers, employees are place at inequitable position in comparison of customers (Nawaz, et al., 2024). This helps customers to gain privileges and act as entitled customer which may cause possible passive attitudes like customer incivility while interacting with employees. Frustration, generated after experiencing a negative situation (Dalzotto, Basso, Costa & Baseggio, 2016).

When expectation of entitled customers are not met then they are more inclinde towards the complaint behavior . Aaccording to the relationship marketing literature, customers tie up in close relations are at high satisfaction level, closer and more committed towards the organizations (Garg, Mukherjee, Biswas & Kataria, 2015). Past literature shows that the tendency to view himself more deserving as compare to other customers is leading to customer entitlement and this preoccupied sense of superiority may have lower level of forgiveness (Khan, & Hassan, 2020; Exline & Zell, 2009). Yagil & Luria (2016) describes that entitled customer might demand for special treatment and high service quality but in failure cases may exhibits lower chances to forgive. Li (2017) found in their study that the loyal customer not submitting their complaints in case of service failures or defected products but the entitled customers are having a higher complaining behavior (Khan, & Hassan, 2020;). In this study, we can draw a conclusion that if entitled customers have a complaining behavior (Imran & Akhtar, 2023).

Under the lens of social cognitive theory, it can be stated that entitled customers are usually comparing brand with other brands in the customer decision process and are more advocate in case of desirable results and satisfaction due to the social comparisons (personal cognition factors) in the social environment (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Thus, customer entitlement behavior may have more a) customer incivility and (b) complaint behaviors. According to Walsh and Brylla (2017), recovery process is quite complex by the entitled customer in service failure cases. Customers may take a grand instance against it in a group form and entitled customer seems to have more aggressive behaviors at this state. They are comparing themselves with other customers and because of their superior feelings they tend to be more voiced. Social cognitive theory also demonstrates that the entitled customers are comparing themselves and being a sense of superiority, if they are getting the desirable results, they are likely be more brand advocate as compare to the other customer presence in group form. Hence it can be hypothesized that:

H3: Customer entitlement is positively related to (a customer incivility and (b)

complaint behavior

Mediating Role of Customer Entitlement between Preferential treatment and Outcomes

Particular customers having special privileges while the others are not is called preferential treatment (Wetzel et.al., 2014). These include exclusive discounts, special treatments, free upgrades and random prizes (Polyakova, Estes & Ordanini, 2020). On one side preferential treatment can be the basis for organizational profitability and long-term customer relationship and retention (Homburg et. al., 2008) but on other side it can generate the adverse effects on customer behavior (Zhang & Hanks, 2015). Negative outcomes of preferential treatment have already been observed in the past literature but customer entitlement part is missing (Polyakova, Estes & Ordanini, 2020). Preferential treatment is somewhat scarce or limited, therefore some customers get this favor. In the result, customers feel themselves unique and special. Wetzel et.al., (2014) emphasis that customer's feeling as special evokes by getting the preferential treatment. Rational customers usually identify of their increased demand so adequate special privileges and status (Lacey, Suh & Morgan, 2007). In this way, customers having preferential treatment may generate the entitlement feeling among them (Polyakova, Estes & Ordanini, 2020).

Entitlement is not a simple phenomenon having linkages with cognitive processes and perceptions inclusive of justice in certain situations (Jordan et. al, 2017). Although entitlement has long history in accordance to individual trait as a narcissism factor, but there is not any comprehensive definition exists (Brummel & Parker, 2015). In marketing literature context, individuals (customers here) are expecting entitled to some particular things (Naumann, Minsky & Sturman, 2002). Customer entitlement is a constant and ubiquitous feeling in which assumes that one is more deserving and entitled than (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline & Bushman, 2004). Customer entitlement refers to the customer's perceptions for himself as a special one in service environment (Boyd & Helms, 2005). There is a reciprocity sense between customer and the organizations where customer demands special treatment without equally participation (Fisk & Neville, 2011). Van, Spears and Fabrizze (2013) explains entitled customers have more positive behaviors and loyalty intentions if alone but not in presence of other customers. This pin points the customer entitlement originates from the situational factors. Reczek, Haws and Summers (2014) elaborates customer entitlement as based on the larger customer lifetime values increasing the desire of high rewards and deservingness feelings (Azhar, 2024). Li et. al (2017) describes customer entitlement as special ones and feels entitled to get extra offerings from the organization. Zitek and Jordan (2019) explains entitled customers are not taking care of the social acceptance and benefit for others once they are deciding to act on. Hence they are selfish (Campbell et. al, 2004) and make unethical decisions (Azhar, 2024; Vincent & Kouchaki, 2016).

Motivation is an important feature of social cognitive theory and its key internal processes are self-evaluation, social comparison and attribution (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Therefore, preferential treatment provides such information which makes the

brand responsible causes failures in service provisioning due to the entitled customer's characteristics. Hence such information makes more relevant for people with higher levels of entitlement, than the less entitled individuals, in the presence of preferential treatment. If the lack of preferential treatment happens because the service providers desecrated the service provisioning rule, entitled customers traits may consider the fault of service providers, irrespective it may hurts themselves or others, in this way, it assumes that:-

H4: Customer entitlement mediates the relationship between preferential treatment and (a) customer incivility (b) complaint behavior.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Present study is quantitative in nature. Its purpose is to examine the effect of preferential treatment as a predictor of customer, while also investigated complaint behavior and customer incivility as outcomes of customer entitlement. Additionally, the mediating role of customer entitlement between preferential treatment and outcomes (complaint behavior and customer incivility) will be examined. Basically, author has identified a gap from literature, to fill that gap a model has been developed for testing the hypothesis, thus it is deductive approach study. Deductive approach is considered to have higher methodological transparency then others (Aguinis, Ramani & Alabduljader, 2017). Current study follows the positivism philosophy. According to the context, our research is based on natural environment setting; hence non-contrived study setting is used. Brand users and services users are the unit of analysis. Present study is cross-sectional in nature and data is collected in one time from each respondent. The population of present study comprises of the customers using the services / products residing in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

To collect data from entire population is not practical that is why a sampling technique will be used in research to collect data. Current study will purposefully select (Sarkar, Sarkar & Ponnampalasa, 2015) from adolescent respondents to the old aged. Data is collected from the people of Islamabad/ Rawalpindi, convenient sampling technique is used for collection of the data. Population of these two metro cities is around 6 million which is representing the majority of the population. Therefore, the results can be generalized throughout the whole population of country.

Respondents were included from the four travel agencies having operations in Rawalpindi & Islamabad. We get data from these travel agencies of their customers with the promise that nothing will be shared and will be confidential. Various scholars proposed different sample size ranging from 200 for simple frameworks (Bartlett, Kotrlik & Higgins, 2001; Kelloway, 1998) and around 300-400 for somewhat complex frameworks (Abbas & Raja, 2015; Bouckenoghe, Zafar & Raja, 2015). Questionnaire was floated among 500 respondents to collect the data, 430 were responded but some of the responses were rejected due to incomplete filling of the instrument. Therefore, our sample size of this study is 404, with the response rate of 81% around which is good (Shah, et al., 2024).

Our sample consists of 65% male and 35% female and most of them are employee of private companies like 55% have private jobs, 38% government

employees and only 7% are the business owners. Most of the respondents of our population having Masters degree holders are 38% followed by the Bachelors 34% and 23% have done MS while PhD are 4% and Intermediate is 1% only. Total customer experience with these travel agencies ranging from 1 to 9 years.

MEASURES

Although our questionnaire is developed in English language which is align with the statement of mostly surveys are conducted on the instruments design in English language in Pakistan Naseer, Raja, Syed, Donia, and Darr (2016), but we tried to explain all things to our respondents in order to fully understand and gain their interest while furnishing the questionnaire. .

We have used five point Likert scale for all the measures ranging from Strongly Disagree = 1 to Strongly Agree =5.

Preferential Treatment Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) five-items scale will be used to measure preferential treatment. Sample questions are Please answer the questions in relation to your overall experience with Firm X. Firm X “does things for me that they don’t do for most customers., and usually places me higher on the priority list when dealing with other customers.”

Customer Entitlement Current study will use nine item scale for the measurement of customer entitlement which is developed by (Boyd & Helms, 2005). Sample questions are “In some real sense, I feel that a store’s personnel should cater to my every whim”, and” In this modern age of technology, I should be able to ask a salesperson any question and have it answered instantly”. All the items will be measured on five-point Likert scale ranging from 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 5 = “Strongly Agree”.

Incivility Customer Incivility will be measured by five items scale developed by Balaji et al. (2020). Construct include items “I usually anger to the employees of the firm” and “I pass insulting comments to employees ”. All the items will be measured on five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”.

Complaint Behavior For the measurement of complaint behavior, four-items five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”. will be adopted from Le et. al., (2020). Sample questions are “I complained to the management about its service quality”, and “I asked the restaurant to take care of the problem”.

RESULTS

In this study for data analysis, two tools were used namely AMOS and SPSS. The AMOS software is used for an analysis of the confirmatory factor. The fitness of the model was also tested and developed to support this research by using confirmatory factor analysis. The correlation analysis was conducted to check the overall relationship between variables, and the significance level.

A phase of regression analysis was introduced to predict the effects of the dependent variable over the independent variable. The IBM SPSS was used to assess the reliability and correlation testing. AMOS has been used to check the mediating effect of customer entitlement and between the relationship of preferential treatment

and complaint behavior and customer incivility.

Sample Characteristics

Table 1: Demographic Analysis

Variable	Groups	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	184	62.8
	Female	109	37.2
Education	Intermediates	2	.7
	Bachelors	95	32.4
	Masters	107	36.5
	MS	78	26.6
	PhD	11	3.8
Marital Status	Single	124	42.3
	Married	169	57.7
Profession	Self Employed	21	7.2
	Private Job	167	57.0
	Govt Job	105	35.8

Questionnaires were distributed to the customers using the services / products residing in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. We have received 293 responses out of a total of 350 questionnaires with a 83.7% response rate. As estimated the numbers of male respondents are higher than females due to the lack of females. There were 184 males and 109 females among the respondents, which shows 62.8% male and 37.2% female respectively. Majority of the respondents are having masters degree. Out of 293 respondents, 124 are single and 169 married. Out of 293 respondents, 167 are doing private job which are 57% of the sample and 105 (35.8%) are doing private job.

Reliability analysis

Cronbach's alpha values indicate substantial reliability for all variables, specifically all values are greater than 0.7, which shows that the data is reliable for further analysis. The Cronbach's Alpha values which depict the reliability of each scale are given below in table.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

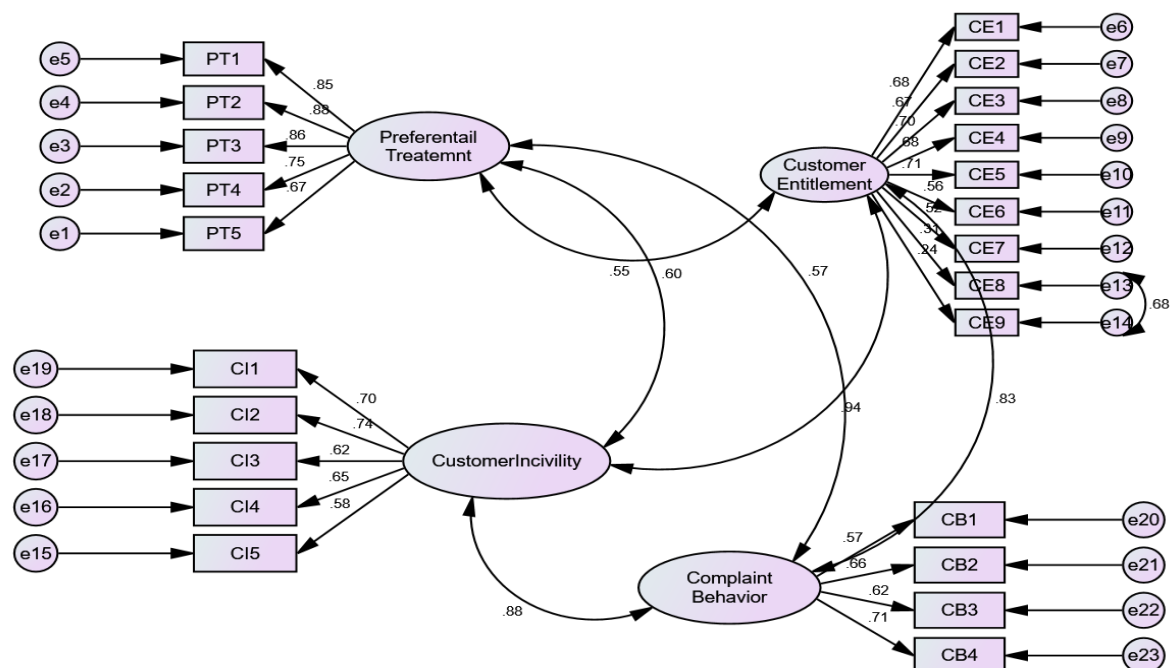
Variable	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Preferential treatment	05	.903
Customer entitlement	09	.815
Customer incivility	05	.790
Complaint behavior	04	.738

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to justify the measurement model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) which consisted of four (4) latent variables:

preferential treatment, customer entitlement, customer incivility and complaint behavior. The combination of various fit indexes: chi-square scale, Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was used to test the fit model. The measurement model provided a suitable fit for the data over the alternative models shown in the table 3 (CMIN/DF=2.09, TLI=0.911; CFI=0.921; IFI=0.922, RMSEA=0.061; SRMR=0.05). The results of these CFAs suggested that the model had satisfactorily discriminating validity.

	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	IFI	TLI	SRMS	CFI
Default model	2.09	0.061	0.922	0.911	0.05	0.921



Direct Model

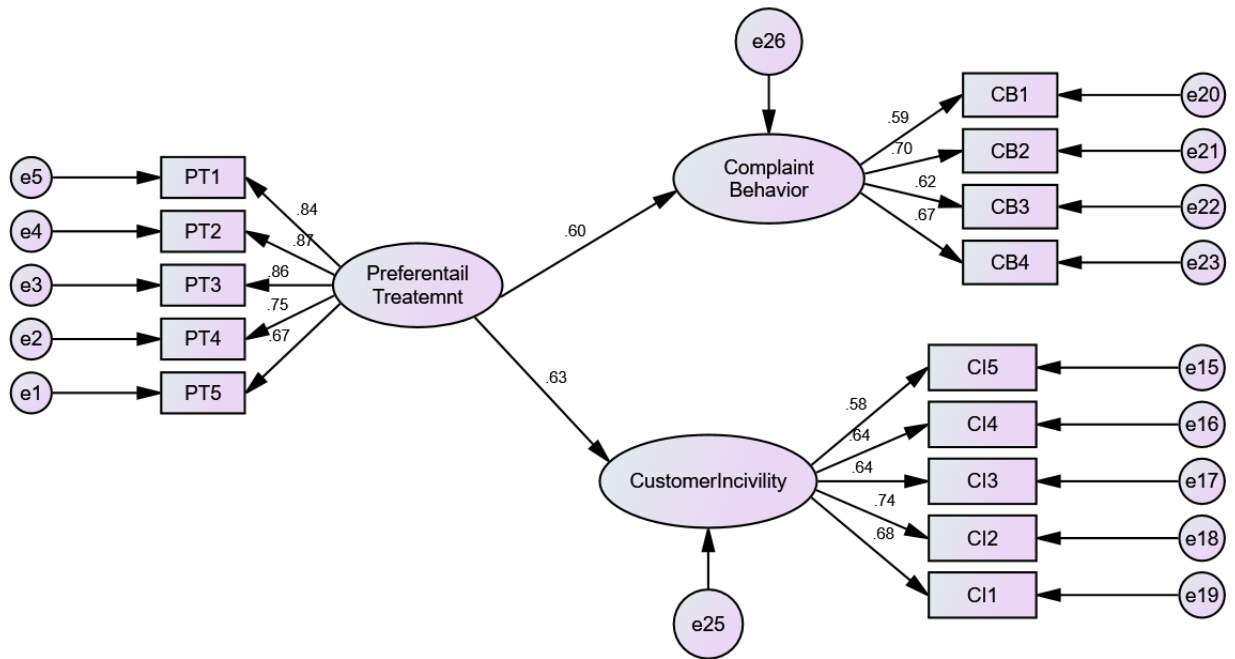


Figure 3: Direct Relationship

The results of the AMOS software are shown in the table below; the analysis was carried out using the maximum likelihood approach, which is the software's default function. The results demonstrate that preferential treatment has a positive and substantial impact on compliant behavior of customers ($b=0.603$, $p=0.000$), with an estimated value of 0.60 indicating that an increase in preferential treatment by one unit will result in a 60% rise in customer complaint behavior. The results also show that preferential treatment has a positive impact on customer incivility ($b=0.632$, $p=0.000$),

Table 4: Regression Weights for Direct Relationship

Independent Variable		Dependent Variable	Estimate	C.R.	P
Preferential Treatment	➡	Complaint Behavior	.603	6.672	0.000
Preferential Treatment	➡	Customer Incivility	.632	7.072	0.000

Mediation Analysis

The SEM is performed to measure the relationship between variables of the study.

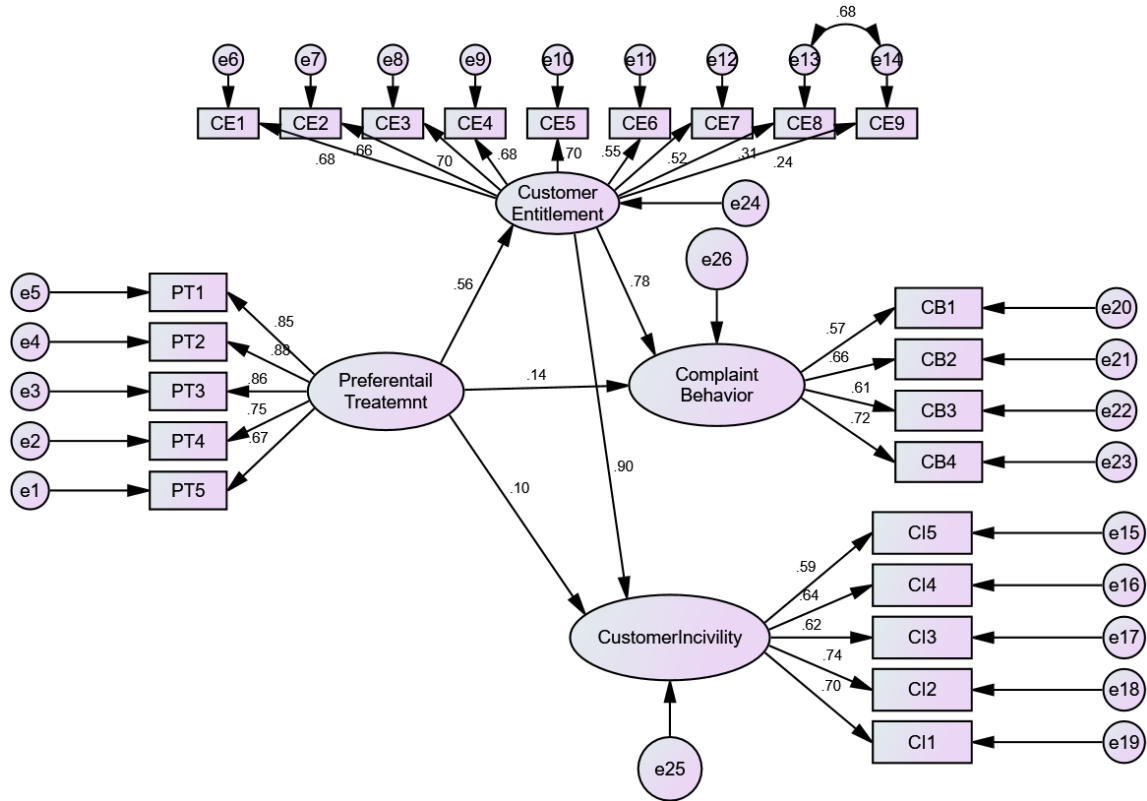


Figure 4: Mediation Analysis

The below table shows the results of mediation analysis by using AMOS software. Preferential treatment is the independent variable, customer entitlement is a mediator, and complaint behavior and customer incivility are the dependent variables.

Table 5: Mediation analysis using AMOS

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Estimate	C.R.	P
Preferential Treatment	Customer Entitlement	.561	7.243	0.000
Customer Entitlement	Complaint Behavior	.780	7.377	0.000
Customer Entitlement	Customer Incivility	.903	8.406	0.000
Preferential Treatment	Complaint Behavior	.144	6.672	0.038
Preferential Treatment	Customer Incivility	.102	7.072	0.041

Preferential treatment has a positive and significant impact on customer entitlement (coefficient = .561, $p = 0.001$), whereas customer entitlement has a considerable impact on complaint behavior (coefficient = .780, $p = 0.000$) and customer

incivility (coefficient =.903, $p = 0.000$), according to the findings. In the presence of customer entitlement, preferential treatment has a substantial direct effect on complaint behavior (coefficient =.144, $p = 0.038$) and customer incivility (coefficient =.102, $p = 0.041$). Preferential treatment had a direct influence on complaint behavior and customer incivility of 0.603 and 0.632 respectively. As a result, the influence of preferential treatment in the presence of customer entitlement on complaint behavior and customer incivility was reduced. As a result, we can conclude that our findings support the mediation of customer entitlement between preferential treatment and complaint behavior and customer incivility.

DISCUSSION

According to the results of the research, preferential treatment has a detrimental effect on consumer incivility. Clients are disappointed by the treatment given to a few customers and the lack of attention given to others, limiting their likelihood of making a subsequent purchase. Preferential treatment, on the other hand, encourages clients to provide unfavorable evaluations for the company and creates a sense of dissatisfaction among them. As a result, the first hypothesis was proven correct, confirming earlier research results that preferential treatment has a detrimental impact on customer incivility and complaint behavior (Hafeez, Iqbal, & Imran, 2021; Butori and De Bruyn, 2013).

Preferential treatment has also been shown to increase a sense of entitlement, that leads to opportunistic intentions for a company that gave preferential treatment in few among the beneficiaries. As a result, the premise that preferential treatment has a beneficial impact on customer entitlement was adopted. It was consistent with prior results by Lee and Pontes, (2020), who stated that preferential treatment occurs infrequently and that receivers of preferential treatment typically feel special or exceptional. We believe that firms are often partly to blame for costumers entitled, like when they offer exclusive services/offers to clients who have not earned such treatment based on their previous conduct (Albrecht, Walsh and Beatty, 2017). Furthermore, in contrast to past research, it can be employed a novel entitlement modification and investigate the impacts of its state variant both in online and offline situations. We illustrate additional situational modification of entitlement that matches a real-world environment, based on O'Brien et al. (2011) research. It is also observed that preferential treatment makes customers suspicious of the motivations of the organization that gives it. When most earlier studies have focused on the benefits of preferential treatment, the new study illustrates its drawbacks.

Customer entitlement is positively associated to customer incivility and complaint behavior, according to the findings. The current study suggests that increased levels of consumer entitlement may contribute to verbal aggression instead of assertiveness by customers within every retail location. The researchers noted a significant positive association between consumer entitlement and consumer incivility and complaint behavior, like earlier studies addressing psychological entitlement. This is in accordance with the research by Li (2017) who found in their study that the loyal customer not submitting their complaints in case of service failures

or defected products but the entitled customers are having a higher complaining behavior. In this study, we can draw a conclusion that if entitled customers have a complaining behavior.

According to the findings, persons with a high level of consumer entitlement can feel isolated from the trade procedure and anticipate it to be exploitative (Hanh Tran and Vu, 2021). A deep sense of customer entitlement might lead to unrealistic expectations about how things will work at the buyer–seller encounter. Resultantly, the researchers argue that extremely entitled customers are more likely to doubt the company's activities. They may become distrustful of the firm's marketing tactics as a result of this.

From the standpoint of customer satisfaction, our findings imply that preferential treatment could be beneficial in increasing the receiver's contentment. Furthermore, our findings imply that additional elements must not be dispersed such that only one consumer gets them, provided higher level of pleasure in the non-unique over-reward case compared to the unique over-reward situation. Unique over-rewards can provide unpleasant attention for the receiver and, as a result, social discomfort, that is likely to lower customer happiness in a scenario when multiple customers are gathered (Kim and Baker, 2019).

The research must be viewed in the context of several companies' increased emphasis on giving customers special service. Several companies are also depending on more complex segmentation approaches, that enable for the recognition of consumer variances and differential treatment (Pu, Ji and Sang, 2022). This tendency is being fueled by businesses' growing recognition that not all consumers are successful, that has contributed to efforts to treat the most profitable clients better. Indeed, markets are moving toward "consumer apartheid.". This implies that preferential-treatment policies can have societal ramifications.

This study supports the hypothesis that people are usually opposed to injustice in the notion that they reject inequitable results. When faced with the choice of maximizing perceived justice or maximizing customer pleasure, many businesses are likely to choose the latter due to the numerous positive impacts of contentment. However, the consequences of establishing relatively reduced levels of perceived equity in service encounters—perhaps by simply delivering an extra aspect to some customers—have not been investigated in the existing studies. One can ask if a delighted client will be willing to return to the company that provided the satisfaction if they believe the preferential treatment was not fair.

Our findings also suggest that managers pay special attention to clients who do not receive the extra feature, as they express lower levels of pleasure. Managers must consider whether an improvement in recipient satisfaction is worth more than the expected less satisfaction among non-receivers. Furthermore, our finding that perceived fairness was greatest when no preferential treatments were present complicates decisions about preferential-treatment programs. Managers must specifically examine the long-term ramifications of preferential-treatment initiatives if both recipients and non-receivers believe preferential treatment is wrong (Söderlund *et al.*, 2014).

If management want to use preferential treatment methods in public venues for publicity objectives, they must guarantee that the preferential treatment is earned via work or loyalty, and that both benefiting and non-benefiting consumers understand the rationale. If the beneficiary feels that observers are uninformed of the cause, he or she may be concerned that witnesses will not see it as fair, even if it is. This is a minor but possibly significant distinction. If the recipient thinks that others do not realize he or she has achieved preferential treatment, obtaining it will not be adequate to alleviate social distress (Söderlund *et al.*, 2014). The findings of studies are in line with this hypothesis. Other guests waiting for a table may conclude that the participant knows the manager or has some type of special position at the restaurant to justify early seating, but the participant has no way of knowing what the others were thinking. As a result, the fear of negative appraisal was triggered, causing social discomfort. To obtain a better understanding of this crucial subtlety, more research is required.

CONCLUSION

The findings apply the findings of various research, which show that preferential treatment improves customer satisfaction, to a situation when multiple customers are present. We demonstrate that obtaining an extra element during a service contact leads to higher levels of pleasure than not receiving it. Furthermore, our findings show that non-unique extra components are more satisfying than unique extra elements, and that not obtaining the extra element when someone else does can lower satisfaction. Furthermore, our findings reveal that the highest amount of perceived justice is linked to the equity-reward system (i.e., no customer received any extra element). In other words, the situation was regarded as unjust when someone—the focal consumer or another customer—received the extra element. This observation adds to the response pattern's intricacy. Our findings also show that the link between happiness and perceived fairness is less among over-rewarded customers, implying that factors like positive surprise and perceived control may dampen the link for customers who individually gain from preferred treatment allocation.

Preferential treatment has been linked to a number of variables, including customer happiness, commitment, buying behavior, positive word-of-mouth, and customer share, according to existing research (Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner, 1998; Lacey, 2007). These research, on the other hand, have concentrated on the traditional service-encounter scenario, in which there is just one central consumer interacting with a service provider. Many service interactions take place in the presence of multiple consumers. We've broadened the scope of earlier studies on the effects of preferential treatment by expressly accounting for the presence of other consumers. Our findings specifically show that receiving preferential treatment can improve consumer satisfaction. Furthermore, the fact that we found a considerably higher degree of satisfaction in the non-unique over-reward condition than in the unique over-reward situation indicates that the way preferred treatment is allocated influences customer satisfaction.

It must be emphasized, though, that preferential treatment is driven by the

reality that only few consumers obtain it; otherwise, the "specialness" of the extra feature would likely fade away. Therefore, determining the influence of preferential treatment on contentment is more difficult, as our findings also reveal that individuals who do not receive the extra are less satisfied. As a result, in a social setting with multiple consumers, each over-reward for one individual results in an under-reward for another.

Omitted variables have their own set of constraints. We didn't measure the unexpected nature of preferential treatment, perceived control, or the good affect that these two factors were anticipated to produce directly. As a result, formal testing of whether surprise and perceived control influence the causal potency of perceived fairness in connection to consumer happiness was not possible.

As a result, future study should address a few difficulties. Some of these are a result of the fact that multiple clients may be present throughout a service interaction. Early studies on service encounters emphasized that they are, first and foremost, social interactions. We feel that our findings—and the difficulties they raise—demand that researchers consider the customer-to-customer part of service interactions. In fact, this connection is only going to get stronger in the future.

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