Exploring the Antecedents in Formation of Attitude Towards Indian Cellular Services

* *Nirmaljeet Virk*

Abstract

For consumers of a service organization, formation of attitude depends on the perception of services that a firm provides (having experienced the services themselves and by hearing the feedback about the services from their peer or reference group). Knowledge of such factors that influence customers' perception in service encounters, is, therefore, critical, particularly at a time when competition is huge and everybody is focusing to win over the customer by offering one thing or the other. As the telecom industry in India is growing at a rapid pace, the present study attempted to identify the major factors which lead to consumers' attitude formation towards these service providers. Primary data were collected from 267 respondents through a structured questionnaire. Factor analysis was used to extract the factors which lead to attitude formation towards Indian cellular service providers. Four factors namely, Service Quality, Physical Evidence, Price Perception, and Corporate Image were extracted from the collected data. The findings showed that for positive attitude building of customers towards services, a service provider must be conscious about the above-mentioned factors.

Keywords : **attitude, service quality, physical evidence, price perception, corporate image**

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The telecom industry, over the last few decades, has been one of the significant contributors towards economic and societal growth. The telecom industry has not only directly contributed to the economy of the nation, but it has also helped in the development of other industries as well. In the last decade, the Indian telecom market emerged as one of the fastest growing markets in the world, but the telecom market has slowed down recently. The quarter ending March 2013 reflected year-on-year negative growth of 5.61% over the same quarter of last year. The Indian telecom market was characterized by a total subscriber base of 898.02 million (at the end of March 2013, out of which 867.80 million were wireless subscribers), overall teledensity of 73.32, low average revenue per user (INR 105), and high churn rates (TRAI, 2013). Around 30% of the total subscribers in the telecom industry in India churn at a rate of 16% per month, which means that the industry churns around 100% every 6 months. This churn has impacted the net addition in the number of subscribers by around 90%, and also brought down the earnings of the telecom companies from new subscribers during the first quarter of 2012 by around 50% (Mishra, 2012). Possibly, then this is the time the industry should take a call on whether it would be happy with the numbers and the churn, or clean its subscriber base and move ahead to a more promising consumer base.

The high churn rates adversely affect mobile telecom operators as they stand to lose a great deal in price premium, decreasing profit levels, and a possible loss of referrals from continuing service customers (Manero, 2008). In the context of such an intensifying competition in the telecom sector, there is renewed interest in customer retention, because tapping new customers is much more costly than serving the existing ones, so it is all the more important to retain the existing customers (Reichheld, 1996). Companies have started recognizing the relevance of maintaining a solid base of loyal customers for long-term survival, growth, and financial performance (Reichheld, 1996; Reinartz & Kumar, 2002). Given the importance of customer loyalty to a service firm, it is

* *Assistant Professor,* Rayat - Bahra Institute of Management, Sahauran, Kharar, Mohali, Punjab.
E-mail : nirmaljeetvirk@gmail.com

important for marketers to fully understand the nature and dimensionality of the loyalty construct (Jones & Taylor, 2007).

The past few years have shown growing interest in determining the factors that influence the satisfaction and loyalty of customers. Still, there is no consensus among researchers related to the factors that help an organization maintain and increase its customer base, and their commitment and satisfaction. Previous empirical research studies have focused primarily on satisfaction, trust, and commitment as the key ingredients for successful long-term relationships (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993 ; Fornell, 1992 ; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos, 2005 ; Pritchard, Havitz & Howard, 1999). Very little research has been conducted on pricing, corporate image, and physical evidence as the key antecedents of customer satisfaction and loyalty. An investigation of these issues is important because corporate image, physical evidence, and pricing significantly affect customer retention either directly or indirectly through their association with customer relationship perceptions (like satisfaction, trust, or commitment) and customer loyalty.

Review of Literature

➲ **Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction:** Parasuraman et al. (1988) defined perceived service quality as the degree and direction of discrepancy between customers' perceptions and expectations. In simple terms, service quality means providing the right service to the right person at the right time and at the right price. Service quality thus, is not just restricted to services being provided, but is directly related to customer satisfaction, price, place, and promotion. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) suggested that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is a key consequence of service quality and can determine the long term success of a service organization (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994). Customer satisfaction is a foremost criterion for determining the quality actually delivered to customers (Vavra, 1997). Improved service quality has a positive result on customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994 ; Cronin Jr. & Taylor, 1992).

➲ **Physical Evidence and Customer Satisfaction:** Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) defined physical evidence as the environment in which the service is delivered and where the firm and customer interact, and it is any tangible commodity that facilitates performance or communication of the service. As suggested by Kotler (2000), services have certain characteristics like intangibility, inseparability, inconsistency, and invariability, so it becomes difficult to measure service quality. As services are essentially intangible processes, customers are searching for surrogates or cues to help them determine the firm's capabilities (Bitner, 1990 ; Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock, & Eiglier, 1981 ; Shostack, 1977). In such cases, physical evidence provides a base to measure and reflect service quality. Surroundings, infrastructure in service outlets, number of service outlets, and written information on the website act as physical evidence in such cases.

➲ **Corporate Image and Customer Satisfaction :** Corporate image can be defined as an overall impression left in the customers' mind as a result of accumulative feelings, ideas, attitudes, and experiences with the organization, stored in memory, transformed into a positive or negative meaning, retrieved to reconstruct an image, and recalled when the name of the organization is heard or brought to ones' mind (Barich & Kotler, 1991 ; Dowling, 1988; Fombrun, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). According to Gronroos (1984,1988), (corporate) image is a filter which influences the perception of operation of the company. This is in line with the results obtained by Gummesson (1993), who stated that customer perceived quality is a function of quality, in fact, quality in perception. Although evidences were found in previous literature that suggest a direct relation between service perception and customer loyalty, but little evidence was found regarding direct relation between corporate image and customer satisfaction (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998).

➲ **Price and Customer Satisfaction :** Kotler and Armstrong (2007) defined price as the amount of money charged for a product/service or the sum of values that customers exchange for the benefits of having or using the products/services. It is widely believed that price is an indicator of quality and forms a considerable role in the development of quality perceptions. Price sensitivity of the customer is one of the key factors that explain the behavioral consequences of customer satisfaction (Peng & Wang, 2006 ; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). To survive in today's cut-throat competition, it has become essential to offer innovative services at competitive prices, so as to moderate customers' requirements and expectations in terms of price and service quality, especially in the telecom industry.

Research Objectives

Many research studies exist today that are related to customer satisfaction in the telecom industry, but research studies related to antecedents of attitude formation towards Indian cellular services are limited. With the emergence of new players in cellular services, competition has become more intense. In order to survive this cut-throat competition, old as well as new companies have to become more aggressive and competitive, not only in terms of services and pricing, but in terms of customer value as well. These days, customers demand the best available in the market, and they don't mind shelling extra money if they are receiving goods and services that are worth their money. Keeping these things in mind, the present study was conducted with an objective of exploring the antecedents which result in formation of consumers' attitude towards cellular services.

Research Methodology and Design

The methodology and design used for the present study is as follows:

➲ **Population Framework :** The population *(N)* of the present study comprised of the total number of people living in Ludhiana district (in Punjab). As per the secondary data, the total population of Ludhiana is about 35 lakh people.

➲ **Sampling Framework:** The size of the sampling units *(n)* was determined with the help of a sample size calculator, which is available online at www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm. At 95% confidence level, the sample size that was obtained is 267 respondents. The survey was conducted using the convenience sampling method.

➲ **Research Instrument:** In order to achieve the objectives of the research, a questionnaire was designed and administered to 267 respondents. The time period of the study was from 2011 - 2012. I tried to cover customers from all telecom providers in Punjab like Aircel, Airtel, BSNL, Idea, Tata Docomo, and Vodafone.

➲ **Statistical Tools and Techniques:** The data so collected was analyzed using SPSS version 20. Furthermore, in order to address the objectives of the study, factor analysis was considered as an appropriate tool for the study.

Analysis and Interpretation

The questionnaire was administered to 267 respondents in Ludhiana district. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in the Table 1. In order to identify the sources of influence in formation and changing of customers' attitude towards cellular services, factor analysis was conducted. The results from the factor analysis using principal component extraction are presented in the Table 1.

The Table 2 shows the results of the KMO and Bartlett's test. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is a statistic that indicates the proportion of variance in the variables that might be caused by underlying factors. High values (close to 1.0) generally indicate that a factor analysis is useful with the data set, and a value of less than 0.5 indicates that the results of the factor analysis are not very useful. The results of the KMO and Bartlett's test indicate that factor analysis was appropriate for the data, as the KMO value is .786 (between 0.5 to

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

S.No.	Gender	Number of Respondents	%
1	Male	143	53.56
2	Female	124	46.44
S.No.	**Age Group**	**Number of Respondents**	**%**
1	<20 years	28	10.48
2	20-30 years	125	46.82
3	30-45 years	103	38.58
4	Above 45 years	11	4.12
S.No.	**Education**	**Number of Respondents**	**%**
1	Under Graduate	34	12.73
2	Graduate	181	67.79
3	Post Graduate	52	19.48
S.No.	**Occupation**	**Number of Respondents**	**%**
1	Student	34	12.74
2	Service	195	73.03
3	Business	33	12.36
4	Others	5	1.87

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.786
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1792.303
	Df	91
	Sig.	.000

Table 3. Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sum of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.134	36.671	36.671	5.134	36.671	36.671	4.046	28.896	28.896
2	1.742	12.442	49.114	1.742	12.442	49.114	1.957	13.979	42.876
3	1.407	10.053	59.167	1.407	10.053	59.167	1.828	13.057	55.933
4	1.110	7.928	67.094	1.110	7.928	67.094	1.563	11.161	67.094
5	.766	5.470	72.564						
6	.728	5.200	77.765						
7	.654	4.669	82.433						
8	.565	4.036	86.469						
9	.532	3.798	90.267						
10	.458	3.275	93.542						
11	.339	2.425	95.966						
12	.238	1.702	97.669						
13	.202	1.442	99.111						
14	.124	.889	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Table 4. Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Professionalism	.878			
Promptness of customer care executive	.844			
Turnaround time for resolving your problem	.819			
Ability to understand your problem	.753			
Network coverage	.742			
Call connectivity	.723			
Service/recharge outlets		.837		
New schemes and offers		.666		
User friendly and informative website		.534		
Match their promises			.743	
Value added services			.676	
Signal & voice clarity			.537	
Monthly rentals				.803
SMS and call rates				.617

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. [a.] Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

1.0) and the statistical results of Bartlett's test of sphericity are significant (where, p = .000 ; df = 91) for all the correlations within the correlation matrix. Small values less than 0.05 of the significance level indicate that a factor analysis is useful for a particular data set. From the KMO and Bartlett's test, we can observe that the significance level is .000, thus, it was appropriate to conduct factor analysis for the present study.

In the Table 3, the variance is explained by the initial solution, and the extracted components and rotated components are displayed. The first section of the Table shows the variance explained by the initial solution. As the components with eigen value greater than one are required for the extracted solution, so the first four components form the extracted solution. The second section of the table shows the variance explained by the extracted factors before rotation. The cumulative variability explained by these factors in the extracted solution is about 67.09%, which is similar to the initial solution and thus, no initial solution is lost due to the latent factors. The rightmost section of this Table shows the variance explained by the extracted factors after rotation. The rotated factor model makes some small adjustments to all the four factors. The results of the factor analysis indicated four factors that determined customers' attitude towards cellular services. These four factors are presented in the Table 4.

The first factor was named as Service Quality since all the variables under this factor are directly related to the fact that a particular cellular service provider is able and fully equipped to provide quality services and products to the customers, that is, the associated variables are professionalism (.878), promptness of the customer care executives (.844), quick turnaround time for resolving your problems (.819), ability to understand your problem (.753), ability to solve the problem (.742), and technical ability (.723). Several studies on different aspects also support the view that assurance of providing proper services by a service provider plays an important role in formation and change of consumers' attitude towards the organization providing those services.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) were of the opinion that customers' perceptions of quality are influenced by various gaps which lead to service quality shortfalls and, in particular, the quality perceived in a service is a function of the gap between customers' desires/expectations and their perceptions of the service that is actually received. Literature suggests that most of the researchers believe that service quality is a judgment of a customer about the overall excellence and superiority of the services and how well the services fulfill their expectations in terms of perception of services (Alamgir & Shamsuddoha, 2004 ; Lewis, 1991 ; Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996) . On the other hand, Brady and Cronin Jr. (2001) identified three dimensions of the quality of service; these dimensions are output quality, interactive quality, and physical quality. Sureshchandar, Rajendran, and Anantharaman (2002) concluded that service quality is essentially based on five dimensions/factors critical from the customers' point of view. These dimensions/factors are (a) core service or service product, (b) human element of service delivery, (c) systematization of service delivery - non-human element, (d) environment in which the service is delivered, and (e) social responsibility.

The second factor encompasses the variables' service/recharge outlets (.837), new schemes and offers (.666), and user friendly and informative website (.534). These variables are mainly associated with the visibility/proofs of benefits accompanying the services provided by the various telecom companies. Therefore, these variables are collectively named as the factor - Physical Evidence. As services are intangible, customers initially look for tangible cues to assess the potential services available to them. Here, servicescape comes into the picture to play its role of satisfying the customers. Bitner (1992), Brady and Cronin Jr. (2001), Parasuraman et al. (1988), Wakefield and Blodgett (1996), and Ryu and Jang (2008) observed that physical evidence significantly and positively improves the mental setup of the customers and thus their satisfaction about the quality of service.

The third factor consists of the variables - match their promises (.743), value added services (.676), and signal & voice clarity (.537) that influenced consumers' choice of a telecom service provider. This factor is named as Corporate Image. Nguyen (2006) defined corporate image as consumers' response to total offerings and is related to business name, architecture, variety of products/services, tradition, ideology, and to the impression of quality communicated by each person interacting with the organization. By far, corporate image has been identified as an important factor in evaluation of the service and the company (Andressan & Lindestad, 1998 ; Gronross, 1984). It has also been said that corporate image, as a function of accumulation of purchasing/consumption experience over time, is used by organizations to attract new customers and retain existing customers (Andreassen & Lanseng, 1997). Previous empirical research studies have shown that corporate image positively influences customer loyalty (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Johnson, Gustafsson, Andreaseen, Levrick, & Cha, 2001 ; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001).

The fourth factor consists of the variables - monthly rental (.803) and SMS and call rates (.617). Customers were asked to respond if monthly rental and SMS and call rates charged by the cellular service providers mattered in their decision of choosing a particular service provider. The customers were of the opinion that they would like to opt for the service provider who gave them the best deal. So, this factor was named as Price Perception. Alom, Khan, and Meshquatuddin (2010) identified perceived call rate as one of the major factors in selecting mobile service providers. Other studies conducted by Balaji (2009), Rahman, Haque, and Ahmad (2011), and Hafeez and Hasnu (2010) also attained similar results. Such a finding is also not far from the outcomes of studies conducted by Gupta and Sharma (2009) and Rejikumar (2013) in India.

Wong (2010) conducted an interesting study by analyzing the usage and payment records of 1403 Canadian post-paid mobile customers over a 3.7-year study period. Wong reported that greater loyalty, thus retention, was observed in customers with optimal rate plans than those with non-optimal ones. This indicates that in order to reduce churn rates (i.e. loss of customers), mobile service providers must seek effective customer retention strategies. According to some studies, the major churn determinant was found to be the dissatisfaction of customers with regard to pricing (Keavency, 1995 ; Kim, Park, & Jeong, 2004; Wong, 2009). Finally, four factors were extracted from the factor analysis - Service Quality, Physical Evidence, Price Perception, and Corporate Image.

Managerial Implications

The present study makes a contribution for both - research scholars as well as telecom industry players. From the academic point of view, it contributes to the existing literature of factors leading to formation of customer attitude towards a service industry. This study can serve as a base for measurement of customer satisfaction among telecom users in terms of product/service quality, pricing policies, placement of services, its positioning, physical evidence, people involved in providing services, and service processes. From a managerial point of view, the proposed study makes the following contributions :

➲ **Identifying Various Antecedents of Consumers' Attitude Formation :** The proposed study reveals the various factors, which, according to the research, play an important role in the formation of attitude towards a product/service. The proposed scale can thus be used by marketing practitioners to identify antecedents among different target segments.

➲ **Assessing Customer Relationship Quality:** Marketing practitioners can assess the relationship of customers with their respective companies by using this scale. This scale will help them to gain an understanding about the scope of improvements they need to make in their products/services.

➲ **Assessing Perceived Service Quality :** This scale used in the proposed research will help telecom companies to evaluate customers' perception about their services vis-à-vis competitors' services/products.

➲ **Assessing Corporate Image:** This scale will help companies to find out their credibility and reputation in the industry and customers' opinion about their marketing mix.

Conclusion

A positive attitude towards a particular service/product is a key for any service organization as then only a customer would consider using its services, which would, in turn, result in customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Marketing literature has time and again suggested that customer satisfaction is the key to customer loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty along with behavioral loyalty and composite measure of loyalty were identified as the major concepts of customer loyalty by Uncles, Dowling, and Hammond (2003). Attitudinal loyalty has been defined as the level of consumer's psychological attachments and attitudinal advocacy towards the supplier (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

The present research study has shown that customers are majorly concerned about the quality of services being provided by the telecom companies, which is pivotal to attitude formation towards them. Telecom companies should take utmost care of offering best service quality in terms of network coverage, call connectivity, professionalism by people offering services, ability to solve customers' problems, prompt services, and so forth. The next major factor customers were concerned about is physical evidence in terms of service/recharge outlets, various schemes and offers introduced by telecom companies, and a well-designed customer interface for displaying the variety of services offered by them, easy access to view and pay bills. Price perception also plays an important role in attitude formation. Customers give importance to the monthly rentals as well as to the SMS and call rates which are being charged by their service provider. Customers also strive to go for a better deal in terms of quality along with price affordability. Last but not the least, corporate image of a service provider forms a perception of the company in minds of the customers, even before they have used those services. Credibility and reputation of a company in the market attracts or distracts customers from testing and adopting its products.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

Although the present research study is based on primary data collected from users of cellular services, the findings of the study cannot be generalized as the research is based on non probability sampling, and also, the research area was limited to Ludhiana district of Punjab only. There is every chance that the respondents may have been biased towards a particular organization.

This paper has discussed the antecedents in formation of attitude towards Indian cellular services. Further studies can be carried out by researchers by empirically examining the relationships of these antecedents in formation of consumers' attitude. Secondly, research may be carried out for studying the relationship of these attributes with customer satisfaction. Third, further research may incorporate the effects of variables like customer value, customer loyalty, and sales promotion on customer satisfaction. Future studies could consider to what extent the measures proposed in this study are valid in different service industries. Furthermore, personal characteristics like age, income, education, and occupation play an important role in shaping a customer's purchase intentions. Future research may test the moderating effects of such personal characteristics on the development of customer attitude.

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