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## Research Article

# Impact of Customer Satisfaction on Customer Advocacy; Mediating Role of Trust

<sup>1</sup>Faria Iram, <sup>2</sup>Ammar Rashid, <sup>3</sup>Muhammad Mahboob Khurshid and <sup>4</sup>Muhammad Noman Shafique

<sup>1</sup>UCP Business School, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>College of Engineering and IT, Ajman University, UAE

<sup>3</sup>School of Computing, Faculty of Engineering, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup>Department of Business Administration, Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, Dalian, China

## Abstract

**Background and Objective:** This paper examined the role of customer trust in the relationship of customer satisfaction and advocacy. Trust is an important element in strengthening the relationship between the customer and the firm. **Methodology:** Winning customer trust is surely not a miracle rather it is the result of careful planning and implementation of customer centric processes. In this study, retail industry of Pakistan was focused as population. Data was collected through survey method and an instrument was developed by adapting questions from previous studies. **Results:** The results suggested that trust acted as a mediator between the relationship of satisfaction and advocacy. Moreover, customer advocacy helped firms in numerous ways including acquisitions, loyalty and brand rapport etc. **Conclusion:** The results implied that managers should invest into developing customer trust through customer satisfaction so, that customers could willingly advocate for the company.

**Key words:** Customer satisfaction, customer trust, customer advocacy, retail grocery stores

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**Corresponding Author:** Muhammad Mahboob Khurshid, Department of Information Systems, School of Computing, University Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia

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**Competing Interest:** The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

**Data Availability:** All relevant data are within the paper and its supporting information files.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship mechanism works based on mutual profitability among the beneficiaries of that relationship. Hence, the focus of relationship marketing is to ascertain, keep and grow the relationship in a way that is profitable for both the firm and the customers, so that the intents of both parties can be satisfied. The nature and profitability expectation of relationship signifies whether to continue it, develop in scope or not<sup>1</sup>. Buyer, if satisfied with the seller and finds value in the relationship will continue to expand the relation. Similarly, if a seller finds the relationship profitable, it will keep on satisfying the customer needs.

The role of honest communication with customer serves as an important factor affecting customer trust and satisfaction when achieved on time<sup>2</sup>. A customer will be satisfied with the seller and consequently develop trust if the honest and timely communication of information take place. Trust is linked with increased satisfaction, implies positive outcome for relationship development and continuance<sup>3</sup>. Elbeltagi and Agag<sup>4</sup> found that commitment, trust and satisfaction were the most prominent indicators in determining a potent relationship. From both theoretical and managerial aspects, the assurance of these traits in a relationship is crucial for companies to maintain and retain customers.

Relationship marketing serves as a two-way exchange in which buyer's trust on the seller increases by the efforts a seller puts in facilitating him. Consequently, the seller's understanding of buyer deepens through their interaction<sup>5</sup>. The seller becomes more aware of the customer's needs and hence can provide more satisfaction resulting in customer's increased thrust on seller's abilities. In this respect, Choi and Lee<sup>6</sup> confirmed that the establishment of trust served as a building block for relationship marketing.

Based on the extant literature review, it is evident that customer trust and satisfaction leads to many favorable outcomes; nourishing, enriching and strengthening the relationship between buyer and seller. Another recently addressed outcome that is much valuable for companies is the phenomenon where customers find company so, reliable and these customers advocate for the company.

Urban<sup>7</sup> suggested that the company advocated for its customers by facilitating and building customer trust by ensuring the provision of honest communication, by developing it according to their needs and by engaging them in loyalty. In return, it created referrals when the customers established complete trust on the company by

advocating for it. Therefore, the power vested in the hands of customers today has changed the dynamics of the market place<sup>7</sup>.

The retail market industry typically offered customers assorted relationships with the physical facility, the service staff, branded products of stores; which altogether resulted in customer fidelity and relationship strength<sup>8</sup>. All of these factors contributed in customer satisfaction with retail store when appropriately organized, supported and implemented in retail store environment. Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate the influence of customer satisfaction on customer advocacy through establishment of trust. This study will investigate the relationship between satisfaction and advocacy in retail grocery stores of Pakistan.

**Customer satisfaction:** Hill and Brierley<sup>9</sup> defined customer satisfaction as "the extent to which the perceived performance of a firm matches the expectation of customer". Customer satisfaction is the outcome of well managed customer relationship by the seller through catering customer needs and desires. Sengupta *et al.*<sup>10</sup> suggested the relationship between the seller and the customer to be crucial in organizations and service markets. Also, the satisfaction of customers increases the strength of the relationship.

Pizam *et al.*<sup>11</sup> presented the confirmation/disconfirmation theory to describe satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The theory proposed that customers will be satisfied when their expectations are met, known as confirmation. Disconfirmation is the state when expectations dropped below the expected level and hence customers are dissatisfied.

The customer satisfaction is an important determinant to gauge the quality of relationship. It depicted the strength and nature of the relationship and its growth<sup>12,13</sup>. Moreover, the authors highlighted three dimensions of customer satisfaction; satisfaction with service staff, with core service and with the company itself.

Customer relations are very important to build and attain customer satisfaction because of many constraints like the complex nature of product, products with high perceived risk and information asymmetries<sup>3,14</sup>. Customer satisfaction is necessary in the presence of these constraints. Companies enhance customer satisfaction and conclusively improve their own abilities and performance. The focus of exchange relationship should be designed to achieve customer satisfaction. However, Elbeltagi and Agag<sup>4</sup> suggested that customer satisfaction does not as a rule of thumb, lead to frequent purchase and it is not always true that customers who get satisfied will be

retained. Satisfied customers in a long run develop trust in company that eventually restricts their switching behaviors. Stathopoulou and Balabanis<sup>8</sup> suggested that the quality of service and switching behavior are assessed by the customer satisfaction.

**Significant statement:** This study discovered the new relationships between customer satisfaction and customer advocacy with the mediating role of customer trust which would help managers to improve organizational performance and economic benefits. In previous studies, the impact of trust on customer advocacy<sup>15</sup>, the relationship between customer advocacy and perceived value<sup>16</sup>, the relationship among customer advocacy, relationship quality and loyalty<sup>17</sup> and customer satisfaction and customer advocacy<sup>18</sup> were discovered, but the impact of customer satisfaction on advocacy through mediating role of trust was ignored in literature. This study will help the researchers to uncover the new dimension of trust that contributed in the literature of customer satisfaction and customer advocacy.

**Customer trust:** Choi and Lee<sup>6</sup> described that some authors have found trust as the building block of satisfaction in their studies. In conceptualizing trust, there have been many different efforts by different authors in the past. However, there exists no single definition or conceptualization of trust. Stathopoulou and Balabanis<sup>8</sup> provided a foundation for defining trust in many circumstances as the expectation that the promises or contract by another party is reliable. Elbeltagi and Agag<sup>4</sup> suggested that trust is one party's belief on other party's truthfulness and integrity.

Kantsperger and Kunz<sup>19</sup> suggested that the extant literature has highlighted certain characteristics of trust such as; benevolence, credibility, reliability, honesty, fulfillment, quality and competence. Veloutsou<sup>12</sup> stated that reliability is the belief that the words of exchange partners can be relied upon. Fulfillment is the completion of the promises<sup>4,8,19</sup>. Competence is the belief in exchange party's performance abilities. Quality is the assurance in the eminence of outcome. Stathopoulou and Balabanis<sup>8</sup> suggested that credibility and benevolence are the most important components of trust.

Credibility is the belief that the exchange party possesses skills and abilities to perform the task. It is thought to be the expected reliance on exchange party's performance<sup>12</sup>. Benevolence is the belief that one exchange partner is willing to consider the welfare of another partner and surrender short term interests for long term interests. Kantsperger and Kunz<sup>19</sup> stated benevolence as the concern and benefit that one exchange partner possess on each other.

Elbeltagi and Agag<sup>4</sup> suggested that trust is of focal importance. From the customer's point of view, trust is an important tool to minimize the risk associated with the exchange. Choi and Lee<sup>6</sup> stated the significance of trust in service environments as the "single most powerful tool" available for a company to build satisfaction.

Veloutsou<sup>12</sup> highlighted the link between trust and ethics. The authors suggested that customer trust is dependent also on the ethical practices and conduct of the company and its employees. Stathopoulou and Balabanis<sup>8</sup> suggested that customers have interrelated set of relationships with the firm, in which trust is the essential element.

Previous studies have suggested that trust can also be categorized on the basis of the reference object. Moreover, trust can be categorized in reference to service employee or to the company. In this regards, Stathopoulou and Balabanis<sup>8</sup> investigated the role of trust on service staff.

**Customer advocacy:** Customer advocacy is an emerging phenomenon which deals customers with very new and different perspectives. The base of this phenomenon lies in the belief that the customer is an intelligent individual who makes an informed decision about his or her own purchase rather than simply being intimidated by the offering. Furthermore, customer advocacy is defined as the act of customers through which sharing of information between customers took place<sup>20-22</sup>. Anderson<sup>23</sup> defined WOM as "informal, person to person communication between a communicator and receiver that are non-commercial regarding a product, brand or service".

Moreover, customer advocacy is not an independent phenomenon which exists in isolation from all the other marketing and quality strategies. For the successful implementation of advocacy strategy following elements are necessary<sup>7</sup>:

- **Transparency:** It counts for providing honest and open information. Customer needs information to make his decision and it is the organization which provides the required information
- **Quality of product and services:** The quality standards for product/service must be substantially good for customers to advocate for it
- **Product comparison:** There must be comparison information describing why customer should prefer a firm's product/service instead of others
- **Alignment of incentives:** The incentives provided by the firm are more valuable to customers when the customers ensure a long-term relationship

- **Partnering:** Trust can be built by making the customer a partner
- **Cooperative design:** A collaborative and cooperative work model between customer and company build trustworthy relationship. Brand management must discover new ways to co-create brands with consumers<sup>24</sup>
- **Supply chain:** It is not the company only which should be trustworthy rather its business partner should also be reliable. In turn, it could boost or worsen the reputation of the firm
- **Comprehensiveness:** Customer advocacy requires the company wide effort ranging from research and development to manufacturing and engineering

**Conceptual framework:** The theoretical framework for this study has been developed on the basis of support taken from previous literature. Customer satisfaction, the independent variable in this model is conceptualized as extent to which the perceived performance of a firm matches the expectation of customer<sup>4</sup>. Kaura *et al.*<sup>2</sup> suggested that customer satisfaction is a key element in decision making about the continual of relationship with the exchange partner and so, creates exit barriers for customers to quit the relationship. The researchers further linked customer satisfaction with word of mouth communication such that; if a customer is satisfied, the possibility of negative word of mouth will be decreased.

Below are the variables involved in this framework. Data in Table 1 identified the independent, dependent and mediating variables in the study.

The role of trust in this framework is supported by the study of Chang and Chen<sup>25</sup> narrating trust as mediating variable in many service relationships. Therefore, the trust construct is composed of benevolence and credibility suggested by Kantsperger and Kunz<sup>19</sup>. The importance of both these components of trust is necessary in building trust in relationships<sup>19</sup>. The researchers proposed that both dimensions had their significance, as the absence of benevolence or credibility would affect equally. Organizations can be benevolent but may lack in competence to ensure credibility. Furthermore, organizations may possess credibility in terms of capacity to fulfill customer demands but have self-centered reason not to be benevolent. Both components are differentiated but equally important in the context of customer trust. Customer advocacy is conceptualized as the power vested in the hands of the customer that is practiced when company advocates for customers.

The conceptual model of this study graphically represents the three constructs; customer satisfaction as independent

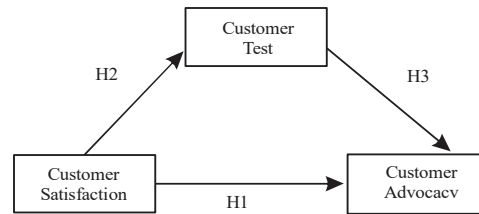


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

Table 1: Variables for study

Independent Variables	Mediating variables	Dependent variables
Customer satisfaction	Customer trust	Customer advocacy

variable, with customer trust (benevolence and credibility) as mediating variables and customer advocacy acting as the dependent variable (Fig. 1).

From the above conceptual framework, following hypothesis statements have been deduced:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer advocacy
- **Hypothesis 2:** Customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer trust
- **Hypothesis 3:** Customer trust mediates the relationship of customer satisfaction with customer advocacy

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Population and sample:** This study was a causal nature assessing the effect of customer satisfaction on customer advocacy by building trust, on retail grocery stores in Pakistan. From the retail industry, three major wholesale retail grocery chains were selected as the sample. The sampling methodology followed the approach of convenience sampling, with a sample size of 100 respondents. The sample selection was limited to the wholesale retail stores from one city (Lahore) because of time and availability constraints in the period of February-March, 2018.

**Data collection method:** For the purpose of empirically investigating the role of customer trust on satisfaction and consequently on customer advocacy, the survey technique was used to record responses from grocery shoppers from these wholesale retail outlets. The purpose of the survey was aided by the use of structured questionnaires; consisting of close-ended questions developed on a Likert scale. Furthermore, the nature of the study was cross-sectional and in a non-contrived environment.

Table 2: Construct's dimensions and operational definitions

Construct	Operational definition	Dimensions/ Indicators	References
Customer satisfaction	"The extent to which the perceived performance of a firm matches the expectation of customer."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overall, I am satisfied with this grocery store.</li> <li>The product and services of this grocery store meet my expectation completely.</li> <li>I had good experience with this grocery store.</li> <li>My decision for this grocery store is right.</li> <li>I believe that this grocery store offers high quality merchandise.</li> </ol>	Kantsperger and Kunz <sup>19</sup>
Customer trust	"One party's belief on other party's truthfulness and integrity."	<p><b>D1: Benevolence</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I believe that this grocery retailer is honest to me.</li> <li>I think this grocery store is trustworthy.</li> <li>This grocery store is concerned with my well-being by providing high value for money.</li> <li>I believe that this grocery store gives me the best alternative.</li> <li>The staff of this grocery store mostly solves my problem.</li> </ol> <p><b>D2: Credibility</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This grocery store is capable to satisfy my needs.</li> <li>This grocery store knows its business well.</li> <li>This grocery store solves my problems.</li> <li>In critical situations I feel well-advised by this grocery store</li> <li>The sales staff of this grocery store are well informed about merchandise</li> </ol>	Kantsperger and Kunz <sup>19</sup>
Customer advocacy	"Informal, person to person communication between a communicator and receiver that are non-commercial regarding a product, brand or service."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I share my grocery shopping experience with my friends or/and colleagues.</li> <li>I strongly recommend this grocery store to my friends or/and colleagues.</li> </ol>	Crosby <i>et al.</i> <sup>5</sup>

**Instrument selection:** The questionnaire was developed by adapting the validated scales from existing literature, adjusted according to the requirement of this study. The measure for customer satisfaction and customer trust was adapted from the scale modified by Kantsperger and Kunz<sup>19</sup>. The measurement for customer advocacy was adapted from the scale developed by Crosby *et al.*<sup>5</sup>.

**Operational definitions of constructs:** Table 2 summed up the constructs involved in this study (customer satisfaction, customer trust and customer advocacy), their operational definitions and indicators.

**Statistical tests:** For data analysis, frequency, percentage, coefficient of correlation, regression analysis and mediation analysis were applied.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 showed the reliability statistics for the variables in this study. The values for Cronbach's Alpha for customer trust, satisfaction and advocacy have been mentioned in Table 3. Table 4 showed the descriptive statistics of all three variables in this study. The total sample of 100 respondents and the respective mean and standard deviations of customer

Table 3: Reliability statistics

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha
Customer trust	0.850
Customer satisfaction	0.836
Customer advocacy	0.795

Table 4: Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	N
CA	3.6767	0.86256	100
CT	3.69	0.648	100
CS	3.8340	0.78935	100

CT: Customer trust, CS: Customer satisfaction, CA: Customer advocacy

advocacy, customer trust and customer satisfaction have been mentioned in Table 4.

Table 5 showed the Pearson correlation statistics for the variables in this study. The results suggested significant correlation between three constructs; 0.791 between customer trust and customer satisfaction, 0.758 between customer trust and customer advocacy and 0.738 between customer satisfaction and customer advocacy.

Table 6 showed the model summary. The model summary in Table 6 suggested that R square was changing before and after the induction of trust as mediator. Before the mediation 57% of change in customer advocacy was explained by customer satisfaction, which turned to 62% when trust was entered into the model as mediator.

Table 7 and 8 showed the ANOVA statistics and Beta values. The ANOVA tables revealed that after running mediation, the significance turned into insignificant, which is the first condition for Baron and Kenny's mediation test. The coefficient table further confirmed the second condition for Baron and Kenny's mediation, by reflecting a change in beta values.

The above data analysis revealed the mediating role of trust in the relationship of customer satisfaction and advocacy. Thus, the proposed model was proved by reflecting that when independent variable was entered into the equation, controlling the effects of mediating variable, the effect on dependent variable was changed and turned into insignificance. Hence, proving the proposed stance taken by this study.

The data analysis also confirmed that customer satisfaction had a positive impact on trust and advocacy. It also showed that trust had a mediating effect on the relationship of customer satisfaction and

and advocacy. Hence, it proved that the hypotheses suggested by theoretical framework are true.

In this study, the relationship among customer satisfaction, trust and customer advocacy had been tested empirically. The result of this study proved that customer satisfaction had a positive and significant effect on customer advocacy. These results were consistent with previous studies by Afridi and Khattak<sup>15</sup> and Roy and Chakraborti<sup>18</sup>.

From the above results, it is clear that customer trust played a significant role in the attribution of customer satisfaction that turned to customer advocacy. Organizations should concentrate on the role of this new phenomenon, which is the best form of non-paid advertising i.e., converting the customers into advocates for company. The satisfaction the customers achieve when they get what they expect turns into trust with the passage of time, as they get surer about the credibility of the organization. This trust in the form of customer perception that company is concerned about their well-being turns them in advocating for the company, without any incentive for that. Organizations must understand that this is the most reliable source for a customer, when making a purchase decision to get recommended by other customers in his reference group. Reason being is the perception and belief that other customer is advocating without the influence of commercial efforts made by the company or the incentives offered to him. Customers generate referrals that are more satisfied at the initial stage about the company and intend to stay for a long time. As Urban<sup>7</sup> suggested that the customer advocates for a company when company advocates for them. It would be a profitable deal after all.

Table 5: Pearson correlation

Variables	CT	CS	CA
CT	1	0.791	0.758
Pearson correlation	0.00	0.000	0.00
Sig (2 tailed)			
CS	0.791	1	0.738
Pearson correlation	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sig (2 tailed)			
CA	0.758	0.738	1
Pearson correlation	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sig (2 tailed)			

CT: Customer trust, CS: Customer satisfaction, CA: Customer advocacy

Table 6: Model summary

Model	R-value	R-square	Adjusted R-square	Std. error of estimate	R-square change	F-change	df1	df2	Sig F-change
1	0.758 <sup>a</sup>	0.575	0.570	0.56532	0.575	132.478	1	98	0.000
2	0.791 <sup>b</sup>	0.626	0.619	0.53275	0.051	13.348	1	97	0.000

Table 7: ANOVA statistics

Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F-value	Sig
1 Regression	42.338	1	42.338	60.478	0.000 <sup>a</sup>
Residual	31.319	98	0.320		
Total	73.657	99			
2 Regression	46.126	2	23.063	9.259	0.11 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	27.531	97	0.284		
Total	73.657	99			

Table 8: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
1 Constant	0.041	0.328	0.758	0.125	0.901
CT	1.009	0.088		11.510	0.000
2 Constant	0.157	0.311	0.465	4.588	0.615
CT	0.619	0.135	0.370	3.653	0.000
CS	0.405	0.111			0.000

## **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that quality, perceived value and leadership styles to empirically test their influence on customer advocacy. Furthermore, structural equation modeling can be used for data analysis in future studies.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS**

The current study revealed certain implications for managers that could help in maintaining and enhancing their relationship quality with customers. Customer advocacy had largely been shaping behavior and decision making of customers, making it very critical for firms. Managers need to be more consistent in satisfying their customers as it would lead to the development of trust and eventually advocacy. Effectively managing customer expectations would certainly help firms in making advocates to recommend the firm in their reference groups. This phenomenon on whole would help firms make not only loyal customers but advocates that bring in more business. Firms should exploit this opportunity without investing in traditional customer acquisition activities.

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