

## Relationship of Service Quality and Consumer Loyalty: Moderating Role of Consumer Perception of Public Relationship

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**Cite this Paper:** Altaf, M., Tanveer, M., Mustafa, F., & Mushtaq, N. (2019). Relationship of service quality and consumer loyalty: Moderating role of consumer perception of public relationship. *Paradigms*, 13(1), 25-31.

Recent research calls to unfold the dynamics of consumer loyalty in the telecommunication sector. This study applies the public relation perspective to propose the interaction model of public relations perception (PRP) on the service quality and consumer loyalty relationship. Therefore, this study contributes the corporate communication literature and addresses research lacuna that how improved public relation perception combined with service quality effects consumer loyalty in the telecommunication industry of Pakistan. Using the Pakistani sample of n=190 mobile service users, this study validates the public relation perception, interaction model. Results reveal that public relations perception moderates the relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty. Managers of mobile service companies can use these findings while making a strategy for increasing consumer loyalty. Future studies may replicate this moderating effect of public relations perception line of action by using different industry.

**Keywords:** Service Quality, Consumer Loyalty, Public Relations Perception, Telecommunication, Pakistan

### INTRODUCTION

The profitability of an organization and its survival in the industry depends upon consumer loyalty. Hallowell (1996) and Altaf, Tabassum and Mokhtar (2018) noted that consumer loyalty affects the profitability of the firm affected. In another study, Helgesen (2005) also indicated that an organization's high profitability depends upon consumer loyalty. In addition to this, Gerpott, Rams, and Schindler (2001) found that consumers decide whether to continue or not its existing relationship with the company depends upon its loyalty. An organization may not be profitable if keeps on losing its existing consumer on one side and attracting new consumers on the other side. To attract new customers, word of mouth can play an important role in increasing or decreasing the number of potential consumers for an organization's product or service. Srinivasan, Anderson, and Ponnayolu (2002) and Altaf, Mokhtar and Sial (2017) found that consumer loyalty is the determinant of consumers' willingness to pay more and consumers' word of Mouth.

The studies show that the loyalty of existing consumers is critical for an organization. Revenues from new consumers might not be sufficient for a firm to make good profits and its long-term survival may become difficult in this case. Therefore, for profitability and long-term survival, repeat purchases from consumers may play an important role. However, Morgan and Rego (2006) found that repurchase likelihood metric predicts the firm's business performance and calls to identify more antecedents involved in predicting consumer loyalty. Public relation perception is one of the possible antecedents, however, slight is known about public relation perception that how it affects consumer loyalty.

A lot of research has been done on consumer loyalty. Altaf, Shamim, Yousaf, and Ghazali (2013a), found that consumer satisfaction increases consumer loyalty. Kim, Park, and Jeong (2004) suggested that companies must focus on service quality in order to increase consumer satisfaction. Companies must not forget to consider certain service attributes based on the emotional value in their promotions because the emotional value has a significant impact on consumer satisfaction and can affect consumer loyalty (Lim, Widdows & Park, 2006). Companies must build brand Association that leads to consumer loyalty (Alexandris, Douka, Papadopoulos & Kaltsatou, 2008). Moreover perceived service quality affects consumer satisfaction and consumer loyalty depends upon the intensity of consumer satisfaction (Juga, Juntunen & Grant, 2010; Altaf, Mokhtar, and Ghani, 2019).

As an antecedent factor of consumer loyalty, service quality has been discussed in several research papers (Altaf, Tabassum, and Mokhtar, 2018). Moreover, moderating effect of many factors has been discussed on service quality and consumer loyalty relationship in different research papers but the moderating effect of public relationship perception on service quality and consumer loyalty relationship needs to be examined in detail. As several researchers have emphasized the importance of consumer loyalty for the long-term survival of the organization in the industry, the moderating effect of public relationship perception is critical in this respect.

With the passage of time, public relations have gained importance. Organizations nowadays are involved in relationship marketing. Generally, consumers are considered an asset of an organization because the failure or success of an organization depends upon consumers, or in other words upon

the public. Service quality is one of the determinants of consumer loyalty (Bloemer, 1998; Altaf, Tabassum, and Mokhtar, 2018). Moreover, the perception of consumers about the Public relations activities of an organization is also an antecedent of consumer loyalty (Hsieh, 2007). Hence, the positive perception of consumers about Public relations may further strengthen the service quality and consumer loyalty relationship. This, in turn, might increase consumer loyalty and ensure the organization's profitability and survival in the long term.

As a societal orientation, do matter nowadays. For competitiveness, service organizations like telecommunication organization cannot solely rely on service quality for achieving consumer loyalty. It was observed that many mobile service companies in Pakistan are involved in Public relations activities. Therefore, it is important to determine whether the consumer perception of Public relations has a moderating effect on service quality and consumer loyalty relationship.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

For the long-term survival of any organization, consumer loyalty can be assumed as the most important factor. The consumer is likely to have a high level of satisfaction when the performance of product or service exceeds his or her expectation. In this case, the consumer is more likely to repurchase the product or service from the same organization that increases the revenue and profit of the organization can increase in this way. High revenues and profits of any organization also depend upon consumer's loyalty to repurchase from the same organization. Study of consumer loyalty can be done through three broad categories that include behavioral approach, attitudinal approach and the integrated approach (Oh, 1999). In this study, the researcher used the integrated approaches that cover both behavioral and attitudinal approaches.

Previously consumer loyalty has been studied with different variables. In its study with consumer satisfaction, Reichheld & Sasser Jr. (1989) found that consumer satisfaction increases repeat purchase by consumers. Moreover, Anderson and Sullivan (1993) found that satisfied consumers are more likely to do repurchase. In addition, this, Selnes (1993) reported that consumer becomes satisfied and loyal when they have good experience with product or service. Additionally, Hallowell (1996) found that consumer satisfaction influences consumer loyalty. Moreover, Bloemer and De Ruyter (1998) reported that consumer loyalty is positively influenced by service quality, corporate image, and consumer satisfaction. In addition to this, De Ruyter and Wetzels (1998) found that positive mood and value attainment moderates consumer satisfaction and consumer loyalty relationship and both these factors explain consumer loyalty. Additionally, Gerpott et al. (2001) made a point that consumer loyalty influences consumer retention. Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger (1997) found that in the case of consumer loyalty, the consumer is more likely to suggest and persuade others to use an organization's product or service. In this case, the consumer is also likely to suggest an organization the areas for improvement. Kim (2004) reported that switching

barrier and consumer satisfaction is directly related to consumer loyalty as both these factors positively affect consumer loyalty. Aydin (2005) identified that trust, perceived service quality, corporate image, and perceived switching cost are the determinants of consumer loyalty. These factors positively affect consumer loyalty. Moreover, Lim et al. (2006) found that some dimensions of service quality directly affect consumer satisfaction and others affect through emotional value and economic value, which in turn affects consumer loyalty. In addition to this, Helgesen (2005) reported that consumer satisfaction leads to can consumer loyalty leads to profitability. Moreover, Hsieh (2007) found that the perception of consumers about the public relations activities of an organization is also an antecedent of consumer loyalty. Moreover, Bontis et al. (2007) pointed out that an organization's reputation affects consumer loyalty. Alexandris et al. (2008) made addition to the literature by suggesting organizations to develop brand associations as it leads to loyalty.

Researchers usually interpret service quality as a measure of how well the level of provided services matches the consumer's expectations. A person can declare service quality to be good if perceived performance exceeds the consumer's expectations. Past research shows that service quality much attention because of its impact on various aspects of business (Altaf, Iqbal, Mokhtar & Sial, 2017; Altaf, Rehman & Ali, 2012; Altaf *et al.*, 2013a; Dilpazeer & Altaf, 2017; Turay, Shahzad, Altaf, Hussain & Habiba, 2017; Yousaf, Altaf, Bagram & Hussain, 2012; Yousaf, Altaf, Sarwar, Hassan & Ali, 2012; Yousaf, Yousaf, Altaf & Bagram, 2013; Yousaf, Zulfiqar, Altaf & Aslam, 2012).

Many measuring instruments have been developed to explain the service quality dimensions. Among which SERVQUAL is the most popular instrument and is used most of the times. For the investigation of service quality in the telecommunication industry, SERVQUAL is used in most of the studies (Aydin, 2005; Kim, 2004; Leisen & Vance, 2001; Lim et al., 2006). However, service quality instrument is operationalized differently in many types of research. In a study by Choi, Kim, Sung, and Park (2007), network coverage, mobile device, value-added services, billing system, convenience and price structure were used as dimensions to measure service quality. In the study of Juga et al. (2010), perceived service quality construct was formed using three central quality dimensions that include operational service quality, personal service quality, and technical service quality. In literature, different versions of SERVQUAL are available. SERVQUAL instrument was developed and refined in different phases. In this study, researchers' used the SERVQUAL instrument suggested by Zeithaml and Bitner (1996). It is a five-dimensional instrument.

Service quality and consumer loyalty relationship are studied in many types of research. Selnes (1993) found that consumers positively evaluate service quality when they become loyal. Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) found that service quality influences consumer's behavioral intention to repurchase from the company. Bloemer and De Ruyter (1998)

identified that service quality positively affects consumer loyalty. Jones, Mothersbaugh, and Beatty (2002) found that there is a positive relationship between service quality and consumer's loyalty to repurchase. Kim (2004) suggested companies to realize the importance of service quality and work on it as it is helpful in attaining consumer loyalty. Contrary to this, Aydin (2005) argued that both trust and service quality have positive effects on consumer loyalty but the most important determinant of consumer loyalty among them is trust. However, Olorunniwo, Hsu, and Udo (2006) suggested that an organization must direct its efforts regarding five dimensions of service quality because they enhance consumer satisfaction, which mediates service quality and loyalty relationship. In addition to this, Alexandris et al. (2008) made a point that service quality plays a critical role in developing brand association as it mediates service quality and loyalty relationship. Moreover, Juga et al. (2010) found that service quality influences consumer loyalty through consumer satisfaction. In shadow of all these arguments, it can be hypothesized that:

**H1:** Service quality has a positive relationship with consumer loyalty.

Public Relations (PR) is defined by Cutlip and Center as “the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various public on whom its success or failure depends”. The center of the public relation activities is to manage an organization's public image so that they could understand the company and its products. PR is about an organization's communication to the external world that results in reactions by consumers. The objective of floating information to the outside world may be to make public aware of product, service or cause. Therefore, by Public Relations Perception (PRP) means how people perceive an organization's PR activities. As competition is growing, consumer loyalty is becoming more important. So an organization's PR activities may enhance brand knowledge, create positive brand image and association. Consequently, PR activities are likely to increase consumer loyalty.

Empathy-Altruism hypothesis states that a person “A” is likely to help a person “B” caught in a problem if person “A” feel empathy towards that person and the level of our help depends on the level of empathy person “A” feel (Toi & Batson, 1982). In this situation, person “A” is likely to help others without anything in return. Moreover, Pro-social behavior theory states that a person is said to exhibit pro-social behavior when he or she helps another person with the sole aim of helping a fellow human (Darwin, 1859). Intrinsic motivation is the reason for this behavior that is a much stronger motivator. In addition, this type of motivation leads us to help others without anything in return. In PR activities, an organization can start charitable work with the objective of gaining publicity. Organizations contribution to some charitable work may change the buying decisions of consumers and they are likely to continue or start buying that organization's product or service. Organization's contribution to charitable and social welfare work can lead to a positive perception of consumers

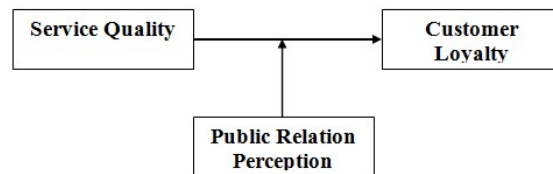
about the company. As PR activities result in the reaction of consumers, discussion of self-congruence is indispensable in the study of PRP. When there is, a high degree of consistency between the ideal self and actual self, self-congruence occurs. According to self-congruence theory, the way consumer evaluate product matches its self-image (Belk, 1988). Ekinci, Prokopaki, and Cobanoglu (2003), found that self-concept influences service evaluation. The consumer is likely to evaluate service positively when their evaluation is influenced by actual and ideal self-congruence. This means that in case of low congruence, the consumer is not likely to purchase.

Past literature shows some work on PRP. Perception of consumers about public relation activities of an organization is an antecedent of consumer loyalty and brand image moderates this relationship (Hsieh, 2007). As per literature, PR is societal orientation and organizations often are involved in PR activities keeping in view the aspect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Clark (2000) reported that public relations and corporate social responsibility are similar because both these approaches involve increasing the quality of an organization's relationship among critical stakeholder groups. Frankental (2001) pointed out that when some assumption is fulfilled, it is right to say that corporate social responsibility is an invention of PR. According to Brown and Dacin (1997) negative corporate social responsibility associations can have a detrimental effect on overall product evaluations. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) found that the positive effect of CSR initiatives on consumer's company evaluation is mediated by their perception of self-company congruence. If these aspects are met, consumer will give a greater degree of acceptance to the organization and its commitment may increase. Moreover, Hoeffler and Keller (2002), proposed that corporate societal marketing programs can help an organization in building brand equity. About the cause-related programs of companies, people can have a perception that they are supporting a cause while using a brand and it can lead them to use that brand again.

Baron and Kenny (1986) defined moderator as a variable that affects the relationship of the dependent and independent variable. It changes the direction of correlation of dependent-independent variable and can reduce their relation but does not reverse it. Therefore, this study considers the PRP as a moderating variable and hypothesized as:

**H2:** Public relation perception has a positive relationship with consumer loyalty.

**H3:** Public relationship perception moderated the relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty.



**Figure 1:** Proposed Research Model

## METHODOLOGY

### Survey Measures

The instruments of the study adopted from past studies. Service quality is an independent variable in the study. Service quality is examined using a 5-dimensional reflective SERVQUAL instrument consisting of a total of 21 items. These service quality items came from the SERVQUAL instrument reported in Zeithaml and Bitner (1996). These five dimensions include reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Consumer loyalty is the dependent variable of this study and is measured using a 5 items scale adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1996). PRP is a moderating variable of this study. Eight-items scale was used in this study to measure PRP. These PRP items were adopted from the study of Hsieh and Li (2007). All these instruments were based on seven-point Likert-type scale battery (1= strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). Moreover, demographic variables include age, gender, monthly income, and profession.

### Data collection and Analysis Procedure

The purpose of this study is to examine the moderating effect of PRP on Service Quality and Consumer loyalty relationship in the telecommunication Industry of Pakistan. The consumers of mobile telecommunication were considered as the target population. Data were collected from 190 users of mobile telecommunication. Data were collected from university students through systematic sampling. Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire. Correlation and regression analysis was carried out to analyze the data whereas descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographics of the sample.

Data includes 57.2% male. Moreover, 50.3% of the users belonged to the 18 to 25 age group. Remaining includes 26% (26-35), 12.7% (36-45) and 11.1% (46 and above). In last 54.1% of the respondents has family income up to RS 20,000, while 19.9% of the respondents have family income RS 20,001 to RS 40,000. Moreover, 18.2% of the respondents belongs to the RS 40,001 to RS 60,000 and the remaining 7.7% of the respondents have family income above RS 60,000.

### RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In the preliminary analysis of the study, the researcher tried to fulfill the entire requirement. According to the descriptive statistics, the data of the study was normal and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) stated that the data has appropriate sampling adequacy. Moreover, to access the common method biases was accessed through Herman's one-factor test as suggested by (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003). The results of common method variance (CMV) suggest that all the items of the study produce only 27.72% of the variance.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

	N	Mean	S.D
PRP	181	4.21	1.399
CL	181	4.74	1.014
SQ	181	4.02	.945

PRP = Public Relation Perception, CL = Consumer Loyalty, SQ = Service Quality

### Structural Equation Modelling

The analysis of the study relies on the variance-based approach of structural equation modeling technique (VB-SEM) because the data was non-normal and study wants to predict the combined effect of service quality and perception of the public relations on consumer loyalty in telecommunication sector of Pakistan. Moreover, the sample size was relatively small. Hence, the most appropriate technique in the situation was partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to deal with the problem.

### Measurement Model Evaluation

Evaluation of measurement model consists of the multi-dimensional construct of service quality that has five dimensions and two one-dimensional constructs that includes consumer loyalty and perception of public relations. The results of the study revealed that all the constructs and its dimensions fulfill the criteria of Average variance extracted (AVE) and touches its threshold level of 0.50. No doubt, some loadings are below the threshold level and even below 0.50 but the items were retained due to its importance (Hinkin, 1995). Moreover, all the AVE values meeting the threshold level of 0.50 and values of Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values also exceeded the threshold level of 0.70. Finally, the discriminant validity was assessed through the criteria suggested by Fornell & Larcker (1981). The results of the study indicated that the values of the square root of AVE are greater than the highest level of correlation among constructs. Hence, the findings of the study confirm the reliability and validity of the first and second order of the measurement.

**Table 2. Reliability and validity of the outer model**

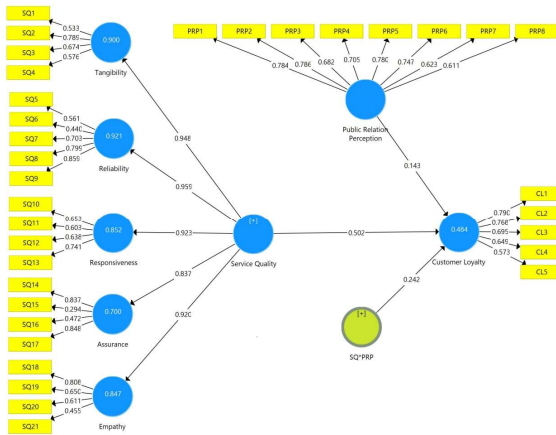
First Order	Second Order	Labeling	Loadings	AVE	CR	Alpha
CL	Uni-Dim	CL1	0.779	0.49	0.82	0.73
		CL2	0.765			
		CL3	0.682			
		CL4	0.661			
		CL5	0.594			
PRP	Uni-Dim	PRP1	0.785	0.51	0.89	0.87
		PRP2	0.786			
		PRP3	0.685			
		PRP4	0.706			
		PRP5	0.781			
		PRP6	0.746			
		PRP7	0.626			
		PRP8	0.607			
Tang.		SQ1	0.533			
		SQ2	0.789			
		SQ3	0.674			
		SQ4	0.576			
Reliability		SQ5	0.561			
		SQ6	0.439			
		SQ7	0.703			
		SQ8	0.799			
		SQ9	0.859			
		SQ10	0.653			
		SQ11	0.602			
		SQ12	0.638			
Responsiveness		SQ13	0.741			
		SQ14	0.837			
		SQ15	0.495			
Assurance		SQ16	0.472			
		SQ17	0.848			
Empathy		SQ18	0.808			
		SQ19	0.650			

SQ	SQ20	0.611	0.84	0.96	0.90
	SQ21	0.455			
	Tangibility	0.948			
	Reliability	0.959			
	Responsive				
	ness	0.923			
	Assurance	0.837			
Empathy	0.920				

**Table 3. Discriminant Validity Analysis**

	CL	PRP	SQ
CL	<b>0.699</b>		
PRP	0.337	<b>0.719</b>	
SQ	0.636	0.271	<b>0.918</b>

Note: Bold values are the square root of AVE



**Figure 2:** The structural model

### Hypothesis Testing

Prior to going towards checking the hypothesis, collinearity between variables was checked through applying the variance inflation factor (VIF) test. It is recommended that the VIF values should be less than five. The value above five has the problem of collinearity (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016). According to the results of the study, the VIF values are lower than five that confirms that the variables are free from collinearity.

The results of the study show that service quality has a positive impact on consumer loyalty in the telecommunication sector having values ( $\beta = 0.587, p < 0.05, t = 9.615$ ). Moreover, the perception of public relationship also has positive impact on consumer loyalty having value ( $\beta = 0.178, p < 0.05, t = 1.079$ ). The results of the study confirm H1 and H2. In last the value of ( $f^2 = 0.546$ ) has a substantial impact on consumer loyalty as compared to the perception of public relations that has small effect size ( $f^2 = 0.052$ ).

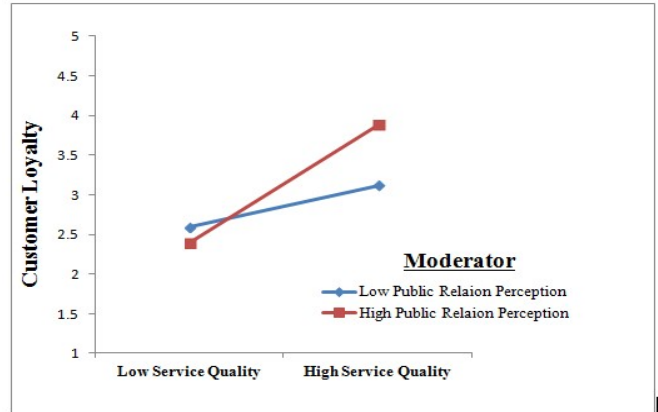
**Table 4: Path Analysis**

Paths	Beta	S.E	t-value	VIF	$f^2$	$R^2$
SQ $\rightarrow$ CL	0.587	0.061	9.615	1.079	0.564	0.434
PRP $\rightarrow$ CL	0.178	0.049	3.646	1.079	0.052	

The results of the moderation effect revealed that the perception of public relationship moderates the relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty with values ( $\beta = 0.242, p < 0.05, t = 5.102$ ) that confirms our third suggested hypothesis.

**Table 5. Moderation Analysis**

Paths	Beta	S.E	t-value	p	Decision
PRP $\rightarrow$ CL	0.143	0.046	3.084	0.002	
SQ $\rightarrow$ CL	0.502	0.064	7.803	0.000	
SQ*PRP $\rightarrow$ CL	0.242	0.047	5.102	0.000	<b>Supported</b>



**Figure 3.** Interaction Effect

Interaction effect in Figure 3, demonstrates the relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty at a low and high level of public relationship perception. At both conditions, the relationship of service quality with consumer loyalty is positive but at a high level of public relationship perception, the relationship is steeper than the low level of public relations of perception. Synonymously, to get a substantial impact, the combined effect of service quality and public relationship perception is effective in the telecommunication sector of Pakistan.

### CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Hence it has been concluded that the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty is positive. Same as the relationship between public relation perception and customer loyalty is also positive. As per the third objective of the study, public relationship perception of the customer positively moderated the relationship of service quality and customer loyalty.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the moderating effect of public relations perception on the relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty. Correlation analysis showed that service quality is positively related to consumer loyalty. Based on its significance value and sign of correlation, the first hypothesis that service quality is positively related to consumer loyalty is selected. These results are consistent with the previous studies. Service quality leads to consumer loyalty (Aydin, 2005; Bloemer, 1998).

Correlation analysis showed that PRP is positively related to consumer loyalty which is consistent with the result of Hsieh (2007). Interaction effect shows that public relation perception moderates the relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty. This means that if a company is more involved in public relations activities along with providing quality service, perception of these public relations activities

will further strengthen the relationship of service quality and consumer loyalty.

### Limitation and Future Direction

The study was conducted on the telecommunication section of Pakistan. Moreover, data were collected from university students. The results of the study may change in the other sectors and sample.

Moreover, need to use the industry-specific measure of service quality for future research. Also need to consider the internal factors such as the internal perspective of branding in future research (See Altaf and Shahzad, 2018).

### Managerial Implications

The results of this study are useful for managers. As it is evident that PRP moderates the relationship of service quality and consumer loyalty, managers of mobile service companies can now focus more on public relations activities along with service quality, to enhance consumer loyalty. As consumer loyalty is essential for the profitability of a firm (Helgesen, 2005) and its long term survival, managers can use findings of this research while making their strategy for increasing consumer loyalty. In the future, the moderating effect of PRP on the same relationship can be investigated in some different industry. Moreover, the role of the employee also should be considered in future studies (Altaf, Mokhtar & Ghani, 2017; Altaf, Yousaf, Tahir, Majid & Bagram, 2013b).

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