Review Paper

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN EXPERIENCES AND DECISION MAKING IN CHOOSING BIRTHPLACE

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Abstract

Understanding consumer behaviour pertaining to healthcare consumption is vital in assessing and improving the service quality. Maternity care is one the largest division that most of the healthcare provider holds within the community of healthcare market and childbirth is most common reported cases. Choosing the ideal birthplace is one of the pivotal decision in childbirth process and the decision made are influences by different attributes. Understanding women’s experiences during the childbirth process provide useful insights on how experiences influence the decision made. Intense competition and lucrative industry required healthcare provider to further understand the consumer need and demand as well focusing more towards customer-centred strategy. Purpose of this article is to discuss and review the relevant literature regarding the childbirth experiences and birthplace choice phenomenon from the lenses of consumer.

Key Terms: birthplace, consumer behaviour, decision making, experience, marketing.

1. Introduction

Understanding consumer behaviour through their beliefs and experiences is a pivotal paradigm in developing quality of services and it has been widely practices by many (Palmer, 1994). Consumer feedback and insight is well recognised in assessing the quality of service offered by the particular health institution (Delbanco, 1996). Thus, understanding the consumer behaviour particularly the maternity services provides a window of opportunity for healthcare provider in understanding further experiences, belief and perception of healthcare consumers (Proctor & Wright, 1998).
Delivering a quality services and understanding what consumer (i.e. woman) need and their expectation to the healthcare services particularly the maternal services signified the need for developing better services that focusing more on consumer-oriented services (Proctor & Wright, 1998). Thus, exploring the consumer behaviour in healthcare services (maternity service) enable further development and improvement in providing more woman-centred healthcare and maternity services.

Rapid development in healthcare industry and changing economic condition in the country caused more intense competition among the healthcare provider where the industry is becoming more lucrative than ever (Rutherford & Gallo-Cruz, 2008). Due to the dynamic nature of the industry, the healthcare provider needs to sell and market their services efficiently to the right target market.

Moreover, maternity services comprise numerous phases of childbearing process and choosing the ideal birthplace is one of the vital components in childbirth process (Kildea, 2006; Kornelsen et al., 2010; Grigg et al., 2015). In deciding the birthplace, women to tend to recall their previous experiences and look up for information that match their belief and values (Grigg et al., 2014; Cherniak & Fisher, 2008).

Each individual has different perspective in choosing the ideal maternity service (birthplace). The process and the journey in childbirth may vary among others and different individual may give different meaning towards the event. Choosing the right birthplace is crucial for pregnant woman in ensuring a comfortable birthing environment and thus creating a positive and memorable birth experiences (Janet Bryanton, 2008).

Choosing the birthplace is not randomize decision, birthplace is a place that women chose to deliver their baby and it might take place either at hospital, birth center or home, thus, it involved complex process in deciding the place (Edwards, 2008; M Hendrix, 2009).

Childbirth is an intimate experience for women and considered as one of the major life decision that influence women psychological development (Berg & Dahlberg, 1995); (Hofberg & Ward, 2003). Labor and birth has been described as the ultimate end process and transition that women experienced and during the process women may recalled her previous birth experiences (Berg & Dahlberg, 1995).

Previous study that have been done in this area highlighted several factors that associated with birthplace choices, Amy Chasteen Miller (2012), discovered that safety and risk are among the major factors that influences women birthplace decision. Rapid development and rising of consumerism within the healthcare industry open up more opportunity and comfortable environment (i.e. birth center, hospital, etc.) for women in choosing their ideal birthplace Ivy Lynn Bourgeault, (2008).

2. Literature Review

Childbirth and Birthplace

Childbirth is one the major event that crucial for women and previous childbirth experience does influence their decision and choices (Cunningham, 1993) and planning the birthplace considered as the most crucial decision for women during the pregnancy (Coxon, Sandall, & Fulop, 2014). Having the ability to choose the desire birthplace will give women satisfaction and favorable experiences Berg & Dahlberg, 2008; Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2012).

Besides, birth experiences and care received during the childbearing process have a significant impact to women's wellbeing and health in the long run (Overgaard et al., 2012; Gibbins & Thomson, 2001).
In choosing the birthplace, consumer (women) has the option either to give birth in hospital, birth centre or homebirth setting. Previous studies reported that women consistently choose to give birth in hospital as a result of safety of both mother and the baby (Coxon et al., 2014). On top of that, the selection of birthplace is also depends on other factor such as socio-economic (Davis-Floyd 1990, 1992; Zadoroznyj, 1999), moral belief (Viisainen, 2000) and cultural and religious factor (Donner, 2003).

**Women Childbirth Experiences**

Expressing and understanding the experience of particular event varies according to how individual experience and interpret it. Childbirth experience is viewed as a critical and intimate event in women life in term of psychological development and maternal wellbeing (Larkin et al., 2009; Murphy-Lawless, 1998; Bergh & Dahlberg, 1995; Hofberg & Ward, 2003). Even though childbirth is portray as a universal phenomenon, still the women's experiences on childbirth is subjective, personal and tailored to individual perception and interpretation (Larkin et al., 2009) and it's a complex process (Lavender et al., 1999).

There is various definition and interpretation of experiences, Halldorsdottir and Karlsdottir, (1996) and Proctor, (1999) defined experience as a unique and idiosyncratic or exclusive to individual. Childbirth experiences in other hand have been profoundly described as an important life event (Vande-Vusse, 1999; Lundgren, 2005).

In describing the childbirth experience, the vital elements in childbirth experiences are autonomy and support form caregivers and family (Larkin et al., 2009), however the meaning on each experiences are different and subjective. The autonomy factor referred to the control during the process, minimal intervention and high level of involvement during the childbearing process and support factor referred to the relationship and support from the caregiver during the process such as midwife support, advice, sufficient information given, social support and paint management (Waldenstrom, 1999; Berg et al., 1996; Larkin et al., 2009).

Moreover, experiences on childbirth inclusive the postpartum care has significant impact towards women life and health as childbirth is a major life event for them (Gibbins & Thomson, 2001). The experiences of childbirth may vary according to individual and it can be either positive or negative experience (Knapp, 1996). The positive birth experience often associated with satisfaction felt form the service received and paint management during the childbirth process which the lesser the pain the better the experience will be (Hodnett, 2002).

Meanwhile, as the experience of childbirth is subjective and unique according to the individual view, (Berg et al., 1996; Lundgren, 2004) women may have negative birth experience due to the outcomes that is not favourable to them such as pain management and control during the process and so forth. Due to the complexity and multidimensional view of experiences, the outcomes of childbirth might give positive or negative feelings to the patient and thus influences their decision (Lavender et al., 1999).

**Positive Birth Experience**

Women that have positive birth experiences tend to have more confident and contribute towards its psychological development and more self-esteem (Simkin, 1991), they felt that they have successfully bring their baby to the world safely. Childbirth experience and decision making engaged with women's feeling (i.e. anxiety, confident, control) which those states of feelings influenced women birth experiences directly (Gibbins & Thomson, 2001). Previous research done discovered that feeling of anxiety and confidence in ability to cope during labor contributed to the positive birth experience (Gibbins & Thomson, 2001; Shearer 1995).

Pain management and control play as important factors in determine whether the birth experience is positive or negative for the patient, for example the women tend to have positive experience if the baby is healthy and the less time consume during the process and vice-versa (Halldorsdottir and Karlsdottir, 1996). Furthermore, support and relationship from caregiver contribute to the positive experience during the childbirth where information shared,
communication and interpersonal skills of caregiver, involvement during the childbirth process and caregiver knowledge itself can enhances the birth experience (Larkin et al., 2009).

Additionally, pain during the process may give different kind of experience where for certain women pain management during the childbirth process (i.e. epidural and etc.) and medical intervention may help them boost their overall birth experience (Salmon et al., 1990; Waldenstrom, 1996). On top of that, obstetric expert stated that the intervention in eliminating or reducing the pain during the childbirth process is a vital factor in creating a positive birth experience for women as the medical and clinical intervention help women to experience painless process (Stern, 1997).

Other than feeling of control during the process and pain management, women’s expectation towards the childbirth may lead to positive experience and women develop their expectation over time and the outcome of positive experience rely upon the accomplishment of their expectation toward the service that they received and process of the childbirth itself (Waldenstrom et al., 2004; Lundgren, 2005).

Although positive experience often associated with sense of satisfaction of successful birth process, yet, the term of successful birth may not correspond with what women felt and expect as a successful birth (Lavender et al., 1999). Thus, understanding the women’s experiences and the underlying meaning through their experiences may help to understand better women’s choice and expectation towards childbirth.

**Negative Experiences**

The negative experiences may cause by various factors such as complication during birth, expectation is not met, poor doctor-patient relationship, pain during labor and high level of intervention during the childbirth (Waldenstrom et al., 2004).

The environment during the childbirth may influence the experiences of women where women expectation of having birthplace that favoring their need and want (natural birth and minimal medical intervention) may conflicting with the existing policy and procedure of healthcare and thus stressing out the patient and creating unfavorable birth experience (Miller, 2005).

Previous studies highlighted that high level of intervention (i.e. clinical procedure, medical approach, low involvement during the process, etc.) during the childbirth process lead to the negative experience (Waldenstrom et al., 2004). Having control during the process is a key factor in childbirth experience (Simkin, 1991), however lack of control and low involvement during the process lead to negative experience.

Furthermore, the pain management during the birth process may give negative impact to the overall childbirth experience. Intervention and clinical procedure and instruction from the caregiver may diminish women’s control over the process and impacting the birth experience itself (Stern, 1997). Expectation of birth may also lead to negative experience where the differences between what women expect and they actually received influence their experience of childbirth (Waldenstrom et al., 2004; Lundgren, 2005).

**Childbirth Decision Making**

Deciding where to give birth is an important life event for pregnant women in having positive birth experience (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2012). In deciding the ideal birthplace that may provide pleasant experience, various attributes are considered before making the decision. In an effort of having ideal birthplace that potentially give positive experience, women may seek out birthplace (i.e. homebirth, water birth, birth centre) that give them autonomy and control over the birth process (Andrews, 2004; Berg et al., 1996)
In some extreme cases, women even considering opting for medical intervention (i.e. caesarean) in attempt of avoiding the normal childbirth delivery process and minimal the unfavourable experience during the normal delivery process (Ryding, 1993). Therefore, women may avoid having natural birth setting (i.e. homebirth, birth centre) and considering hospital birth setting as an ideal birthplace for them.

Moreover, women also consider facility aspect in particular birthplace as one of the attributes in choosing the ideal birthplace. Consumer (women) may rate and evaluate the maternity services and quality of treatment based on the clinical competencies, policy and procedure as well as the equipment and technology that particular healthcare provider have as compared to others (Thompson & Wojcieszek, 2012). Competition and existence of numerous birthplace options highlights the important of providing sufficient maternity information to the consumer. Thompson & Wojcieszek, (2012), further discussed that informed consumers helps them in choosing the ideal birthplace, the information given assist consumers in differentiate the service provided among the maternity care provider available in the market as well enable the consumer to identify facility that meet their preferences.

On top of that, in choosing the birthplace, women still considering the competencies and technology available in supporting the childbirth process despite of the attention towards natural birthing concept, women tend to look up for place (i.e. hospital birth) in case for any complication occurred during the childbirth (Rutherford & Gallo-Cruz, 2008).

However, even though various scholars has outlined the attribute that women consider in making decision, yet, there are previous studies argued that women are bounded to the limited options when it comes to birthplace choice due to the fact that in the modern world, birthplace decision are often associated with medical oriented practices (Cheyney, 2008). Jomeen (2006, 2007) further argued that the realism of birthplace option is merely illusion as the consumer choice is bound by clinical and medical philosophy.

Marketing the Birthplace

Consumerism

The movement of consumerism in healthcare focus on the issues of control and involvement in decision making (Mathews & Zakak, 1997). The changing landscape of consumerism in healthcare industry is influenced by changes in social-structural of doctor-patient relationship context where the doctors are more responsive towards the consumer demands consumer and the consumer are more participative and able to shop around the service (i.e. package, doctor, etc.) that they desired (Reeder, 1972).

Thus, the shift of consumerism in healthcare, open for more window opportunities and dynamic competition among service provider as well as served as the platform in improving the service offered to consumer.

In the other hand, feminism ideology in healthcare and childbirth has witnessed the movement from traditional roles of consumer (women) to more active participator in childbirth process. In effort in engaging consumer in active decision making, feminist activist has set up program in promoting childbirth education to women (Rutherford & Gallo-Cruz, 2008).

The feminist activist also highlighted the domination role of male doctor in childbirth can be change through education and participation of women in childbirth process. Through classes, women know what to expect from their childbirth experiences (Kushner, 2005) and through knowledge received woman has started to demand changes in policy particularly (i.e. partner present during the delivery, gender of the doctor, etc.).

The rise of consumerism and feminism has change the landscape of healthcare industry with growing numbers of maternity care provider and intense competition, healthcare provider need to improve and adapt to the changing environment.
Understanding the consumer need and wants is crucial in sustaining the business operations and revenues as maternity services is one of the major division for most of the hospital operation that offered maternity services with childbirth as a common reason for hospitalisation (Rutherford & Gallo-Cruz, 2008).

The competition is much more intense especially for private healthcare since the fees that they charged is much more expensive as compared to government hospital/national hospital. Therefore, effective marketing strategy (i.e. advance facilities, attractive package, advertisement, website, etc.) has becoming essential elements in better competing within dynamic industry (Scott et al., 2000).

3. Conclusion

Childbirth comprises series of complex process and reflecting as an important life event for women. Understanding what women need and wants during the childbearing process is crucial for healthcare provider in delivering quality services and meeting the consumer expectation. Experiences of women during the childbirth process constitute invaluable information for service provider, policy makers as well other stakeholder in an effort providing better service quality.

Moreover, consumerism in healthcare industry has changed the way doctor-patient relationship where the center attention nowadays is to create more customer-centered relationship and promoting humanistic approach during the childbirth process. This area of research has been focusing heavily from the health and sciences perspective previously, thus, there is a need to understand the women's childbirth experiences from the consumer lenses. Issue of how understanding the experiences may help to better understand the consumer behavior in choosing the ideal birthplace.

Reference


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