

INFLUENCE OF FRONT-DESK STAFF SERVICE QUALITY ON STUDENTS' AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT, TRUST, AND WORD-OF-MOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Private universities are growing in the present era. The enrollment ratio is also getting high, and universities are putting efforts to attract more students. Hence, it is essential to provide students with the best quality services as it spreads positive word-of-mouth. Therefore, the present article is designed to study the impact of front-desk staff service quality on word-of-mouth through the mediating effect of students' affective commitment and students' trust. An online questionnaire survey was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan. This study used the partial least square method to run structural equation modeling analysis. The findings revealed that all paths show a positive and significant relationship except front-desk staff service quality and word-of-mouth. Moreover, students' affective commitment and trust mediate the relationship between front-desk staff service quality and word-of-mouth. Results also illustrate that gender exerts a significant moderating role on front-desk staff service quality, students' affective commitment, and word-of-mouth. The study provides practical implications for policymakers, private university management, and educational institutions. Firstly, it is crucial to provide effective

communication training to the front-desk staff to learn the basic etiquette of greetings and humbleness. Secondly, there must be experienced personnel who can assist students promptly.

Keywords: front-desk staff, service quality, commitment, word-of-mouth, private university, Smart PLS

INTRODUCTION

Universities are becoming a customer and service-oriented organisations due to the increasing competition (Chen, 2017). Within this competitive and continuously variable market, higher education is becoming a booming industry. Students have many alternatives available in such a competitive educational environment. Hence, it is a must for educational institutions to initiate efficient ways to attract and retain students (Teo & Soutar, 2012). Many universities provide quality services to the students because, in private universities, students are treated as customers. Therefore, students also expect standard services because they believe that they have paid high fees, so universities should listen and assist them promptly and gently (Watjatrakul, 2014; Bunce et al., 2017). In this matter, front-desk employees provide essential services as they have to face the students all the time. Most importantly, at the time of admission, students interact initially with the front-desk officers. Hence, front-desk officers are the ones who make the first impression on almost everyone. It makes front-desk officers the public face of an organisation. In private universities, front-desk staff plays an essential role as several students are interacting daily. Also, this is the phase through which universities can attract more people through positive word-of-mouth (WOM). WOM depends on the quality of services they receive from the employees of the university. Hence, the main component is the quality of services.

In the past two eras, service quality has received significant attention from researchers and practitioners (Ali & Raza, 2017; Raza et al., 2020a). Many practitioners believe that service quality plays an essential role in increasing an organisation's performance (Jiewanto et al., 2012; Liu & Lee, 2016; Iqbal et al., 2019). Service sectors need to offer the best quality services as it helps attract more customers because, in the present era, WOM has various advantages. Further, WOM has a massive influence on the decision to purchase. WOM is the verbal communication between the actual or potential customer and other people, for instance, the product or service provider, autonomous experts, family, and friends (Chaniotakis & Lympelopoulos, 2009). Generally, WOM includes

customer reviews, product quality comments, quality of services, and trust from one individual to another. These communications may be either positive or negative.

WOM is based on several factors, such as quality of products or services, customers' commitment, and trust. Eventually, when consumers receive quality services, they will become loyal customers and spread positive WOM. In universities, the services begin at the front-desk when students come in for admissions, for the class related query, for students' affairs. For other issues, all students first contact the front-desk officers. Hence, front-desk personnel represent an organisation, and they are required to provide professional and quality services to ensure customer satisfaction (Rahimizhian et al., 2020). Uninterested and non-cooperative staff is the reason students spread negative WOM. However, if students are emotionally committed to their universities, they might ignore the behaviour. Still, it might create a problem for the management if it lasts for an extended period. According to Schlesinger et al. (2017) and Nelofer (2013), private universities can gain a competitive advantage by offering quality services, resulting in long term survival and success. The researchers have focused on the quality of services in private universities and revealed the existence of a positive and significant influence of service quality on student satisfaction that leads to a positive image of the university (Chandra et al., 2019; Dicker et al., 2019; Blouin, 2019; Harrison et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, the higher education commission (HEC) has established radical steps for enhancing higher education. Hence, HEC pays more attention to quality management principles, which is proved to be valuable. Therefore, the International Organization for Standardization international standards implementation is considered a significant step toward quality services. In Pakistan, the education sector is improving service quality dimensions. However, private universities are paying great attention to student satisfaction. Few prior researches study the service quality but in different contexts such as service quality of library front-desk staff in medical colleges of Lahore (Ahmed et al., 2015), service quality and customer satisfaction in Islamic banks (Ali & Raza, 2017), and banking sector (Zameer et al., 2015; Hassan et al., 2013). Hence, we believe that there is a need to conduct research that examines students' WOM based on front-desk staff services in higher education. Front-desk officers can either attract more students or form a bad image. So, it is necessary to evaluate the association in a private university context as they are trying their best to have a competitive advantage. It will provide an in-depth analysis of services and how services develop trust and commitment among students. Additionally, until now,

to the best of the authors' knowledge, no research has been found relative to the service quality of front-desk staff in private universities. Also, none studied the SERVQUAL and commitment-trust theory in the context of higher education. The present study expanded the commitment-trust theory and developed a model by placing the SERVQUAL model's characteristics in this fundamental concept. These factors are also used by Landrum et al. (2007), Izogo (2015), Izogo and Ogba (2015), and Ali and Raza (2017). Another contribution is the addition of a moderated mediation model, i.e., students' trust and affective commitment are analysed as mediators, and gender is incorporated as a moderating variable. We have used these variables as mediators and moderators for the following reasons: it provides an in-depth understanding of students' behaviour and whether their trust and commitment foster the association between service quality and WOM. It will also be beneficial for the educational institutions to analyse the working area on which factor they should work to increase trust and commitment. Additionally, Mouakket (2018) stated that trust and emotional values are more important for females than males. Males are more result-oriented and prefer satisfaction (José Liébana-Cabanillas et al., 2014). In the present model, gender is used as a moderator to examine whether the relationship between service quality and WOM will be stronger for male or female students. It will provide a new insight to researchers and educational institutions as well.

The current paper is organised into five sections. The first section is the introduction, followed by the literature review, where we discussed the relevant theoretical model used to develop the conceptual framework and the hypotheses to be tested. The research methodology used in the paper is elaborated, including the description of the research model, the data collection and instrument details, and the demographics of the considered sample. Next, we presented the findings of the study by performing the data analysis. It is followed by the last part highlighting the conclusion of this paper, which describes the implications of the findings and the future research directions that are derived from this study's limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

SERVQUAL model

Parasuraman et al. (1988) introduced service quality dimensions connected with the same service attributes to consumers' expectations. The model of

SERVQUAL is widely applied in several types of research related to academics and in different industries of services (Kumar & Hundal, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2017; Raza et al., 2015; Akbar & Parvez, 2009). However, in the present research, the SERVQUAL model is used in the context of universities. The following dimensions of the SERVQUAL model are incorporated, i.e., reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance.

The first dimension is reliability that deals with the ability to perform accurate services. Secondly, tangibility deals with appearance, building, equipment, staff, and infrastructure. The third dimension is responsiveness, and it deals with the eagerness to help or respond to customers' needs. The fourth dimension is empathy, and it deals with the care, attention, and individual services provided to customers. Then, assurance is the last dimension, and it deals with the staff's abilities in encouraging trust and confidence or generosity. However, recent works indicated that the quality of services was subjective because existing services meet consumers' needs and preferences (Filieri et al., 2015; Greenacre et al., 2014). The service's quality visualises customers' impressions about the inadequacy or perfection of the service concerned (Kakouris & Meliou, 2011).

Commitment-trust theory

Morgan and Hunt introduced the model of commitment trust theory in 1994. It says that two fundamental factors, trust, and commitment, must exist for a relationship to be successful. This way, customers trust the businesses, and mutual loyalty helps both parties fulfill their needs (MacMillan et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2016). Commitment-trust theory has been employed in many prior researches to study the role of commitment and trust in different contexts (Zillifro & Morais, 2004; Heavey et al., 2011; Phelps & Campbell, 2012; Melewar et al., 2017; Cui et al., 2020).

In the present research, universities are the organisations, and students are the customers. Relationship marketing is the act of generating, producing, and enhancing relationships. As per the research of Morgan and Hunt (1994), it has shaped massive changes in marketing theory and practices applied in automotive and states that this theory would also apply in various relationship exchanges, including vendors, consumers, and employees working in different fields. Morgan and Hunt also perceive a significant need for a future description, replication expansion, utilisation, and analytical interpretation of their theory. Hence, the study attempts the same theory from the perspective of universities.

Development of Hypotheses

Front-desk staff service quality and students' affective commitment

Establishing customer commitment is vital for any sector, brand, and organisation because committed customers are less sensitive to price (Iglesias et al., 2019). Prior researches discussed two types of commitment, i.e., continuous and affective commitment (Hashim & Tan, 2015; Yuan et al., 2019). Further, affective commitment is defined as an emotional attachment with anything, for instance, brand, organisation, or person. Many researchers concluded that service quality is positively and significantly associated with affective commitment (Engizek & Yasin, 2017; Izogo, 2017; Bahadur et al., 2018). For instance, Cownie (2019a) analysed what drives students' affective commitment to their university. Further, she concluded that students' affective commitment is based on positive feelings, best experiences, and services. It results in positive attachment between students and the university and ultimately improve student retention. Another study stated that affective commitment is positively and significantly associated with WOM because when customers receive friendly behaviour, they eventually depict positivity (Fazal-e-Hasan et al., 2017).

Additionally, Le et al. (2020) studied high school students' use of choice factors and WOM information sources in university selection. Thus, when students receive staff's friendly behaviour and get answers to all queries without any hurdles, it will ultimately result in loyalty and affective commitment in universities. So, based on prior literature, the following hypothesis is generated:

H1: There is a significant relationship between front-desk staff service quality and students' affective commitment towards the university.

Front-desk staff service quality and students' trust

According to Kordupleski et al. (1993), service quality is the element by which organisations can gain significant outcomes. It also enhances both finance performances (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993) and cooperation (Easton & Jarrell, 1998). However, in business to business market settings, the quality of services considered an essential way of getting benefits (Sampaio et al., 2019). According to Abdullah and Musa (2014), trust is crucial in maintaining a strong business to business (B2B) relationship. Further, Boonlertvanich (2019) researched to develop a comprehensive model representing the relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty in a retail banking service; thus, the results revealed that is service quality has a positive and

significant impact on trust. Another study targeted the Indonesian market to study the service quality dimension of Indonesian Islamic banking.

Moreover, to determine service quality's relationship towards customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty in Indonesian Islamic banking, the authors concluded that customer loyalty could be improved if the Indonesian Islamic bank can improve its customers' trust (Fauzi & Suryani, 2019). It shows that trust is essential for customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive WOM. Based on the results of previous researches, the following hypothesis is generated:

H2: There is a significant relationship between front-desk staff service quality and students' trust.

Students' affective commitment and WOM

WOM communication may involve potential consequences of commitment (Dick & Basu, 1994). Affective commitment is all about emotional attachment; Ryu and Park (2020) stated that such commitment compels individuals to engage in positive WOM. Moreover, affective commitment fosters motivation among individuals. The motivated behaviour of customers helps the firms to achieve their goals (Li & Chang, 2016). Another research revealed that trust is the most significant customer satisfaction driver, followed by performance expectancy and perceived value. Also, affective commitment and satisfaction are identified as the strongest predictors of WOM (Chen & Yuan, 2020). A recent study inspects the relationship between commitment and WOM communication within the context of higher education (Cownie, 2019a). The findings stated that affective commitment towards academics has the most significant influence on students' intentions to talk positively about their university experience. This research corroborates extant studies that articulate the importance of affective commitment as a driver of positive WOM, highlighting the critical contribution of affective commitment directed towards people. Therefore, it shows that when customers are committed, they spread positivity about that service or products. So, we develop the following hypothesis in the context of higher education:

H3: There is a significant relationship between students' affective commitment and WOM.

Students' trust and WOM

Trust has a significant role in forming positive WOM (Sipilä et al., 2017). In customer relationship management, trust is considered the main ingredient

because it guarantees loyalty and positive WOM. Hence, positive WOM ultimately results in more customers and the right image. Kassim and Abdullah (2010) argue that firms should establish 'total trust' to ensure genuine customer loyalty. Moreover, when customers start trusting any organisation's services and products, they will recommend it to their friends and family; thus, the chain continues (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003; Lee & Hong, 2019). Islam and Rahman (2016) researched the direct relationship between customer involvement with trust and WOM. Additionally, findings revealed that customer engagement leads to trust that is positively and significantly linked with WOM. Thus, based on previous researches, the following hypothesis is formed:

H4: There is a significant relationship between students' trust and WOM.

Front-desk staff service quality and WOM

The past studies illustrated that consumers' WOM is essential in developing attitudes (Khraim, 2011). It also plays a vital role in the context of purchase decision making (Kitapci et al., 2014). Further, Markovic et al. (2018) stated that the best quality products and services attract customers; thus, it results in customer satisfaction, and satisfied customers are a real source of WOM. Moreover, a study determined the impact of service quality dimensions on patient satisfaction, repurchase intentions, and WOM communication in the public healthcare industry. Results revealed that the quality of services is linked positively with WOM (Kitapci et al., 2014).

Additionally, Choudhury (2014) researched the influence of service quality on customers' WOM in the retail banking industry. The results concluded that the four dimensions of service quality in retail banking, i.e., attitude, competence, tangibles, and convenience, showed that the service quality factor attitude is most important in influencing WOM. However, other factors are also significantly associated with WOM. Another researcher studied the influence of brand experience, service quality, and perceived value on WOM of retail bank customers by incorporating the mediating role of loyalty (Mukerjee, 2018). Hence, we generated the following hypothesis based on the evidence of prior researchers:

H5: There is a significant relationship between front-desk staff service quality and WOM.

Mediating effect of students' affective commitment

Higher education's business characteristics deliver prompt services, student retention, marketing strategies, finance, and assisting and satisfying students. Therefore, it is the academic staff's responsibility to provide up to the mark services (Bowden, 2011). Students appreciate the knowledge and expertise of the staff that can resolve their queries promptly. Further, Cownie (2019a) researched the factors that drive students' affective commitment to their university. Additionally, the findings revealed that when students are highly committed to their universities, it eventually results in retention, satisfaction, and students' willingness to recommend. Therefore, affective commitment plays a significant role in forming a positive linkage between service quality and positive WOM (Van Tonder et al., 2018). Also, Bahadur et al. (2018) stated that the service sector needs to emphasise service quality to increase customer satisfaction. Moreover, WOM can do wonders if it spread positivity. Hence, we develop the following hypothesis based on the mention discussion:

H6: Students' affective commitment mediates the relationship between service quality and WOM.

Mediating effect of students' trust

Service failure is often unavoidable; it distresses the level of satisfaction, trust, and WOM (Kalinić et al., 2019). It is essential to provide customers with the best services to develop a strong trust based relationship (Rather et al., 2019). Many researchers stated that trust has a positive and significant relationship with WOM. When the trust level is high, people intentionally and unintentionally talk about good services with other people. Therefore, trust is considered to be an essential component in building loyal customers. Prior researchers studied trust as the mediator in a different context (Liao et al., 2019; Palacios-Florencio et al., 2018; Saleem et al., 2017).

Moreover, Sultan and Wong (2019) studied the impact of service quality on the university's brand performance, the brand image of the university, and behavioral intention by taking students' satisfaction and trust as mediators and the moderating effect of gender. The findings depict that trust and happiness are the key indicators of forming a positive attitude among higher education students. Therefore, based on prior literature, we hypothesise as follow:

H7: Students' trust mediates the relationship between service quality and WOM.

Moderating role of gender

Men and women differ in their emotional responses (McRae et al., 2008). Also, the way of conveying feelings and reacting to a specific situation is not the same. Prior researches highlighted the direct impact of gender on service quality, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and fairness perception (Valaei et al., 2016; Shapoval et al., 2018; Kurtulmuşoğlu et al., 2018). In many situations, both genders depict different behaviours in response to staff attitude, teacher strictness or friendliness, friends gathering, study environment. Also, gender plays various roles as a leader, team member, student, and friend (Bailey & Graves, 2016; Schweder & Raufelder, 2019). Hence, it is believed that gender perception regarding educational institutions and staff is not the same because some females are emotionally strong and sensitive that they try to understand the situation instead of reacting rapidly. In contrast, men are more aggressive; thus, it results in conflicts (Janošević & Petrović, 2019). So, we believed that the relationship between service quality and WOM would be stronger for male students than female students.

On the other hand, females appreciate trustworthy relationships, and once the trust is developed, they get attached easily (Tifferet & Herstein, 2012). Also, it fosters the emotional attachment that results in high affective commitment. While males find it difficult to trust someone quickly thus, based on this result, we state that the relationship between affective commitment, trust, and WOM will be stronger for female students than male students. Therefore, based on the above discussion, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H8: Gender moderates the relationship between front-desk staff service quality and WOM.

H9: Gender moderates the relationship between students' affective commitment and WOM.

H10: Gender moderates the relationship between students' trust and WOM.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Model

The combined model of SERVQUAL and commitment-trust theory is illustrated in Figure 1. Hence, the conceptual model contains three constructs of the commitment-trust theory: students' affective commitment, students' trust, and

WOM, along with additional dimensions of the SERVQUAL model, which are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

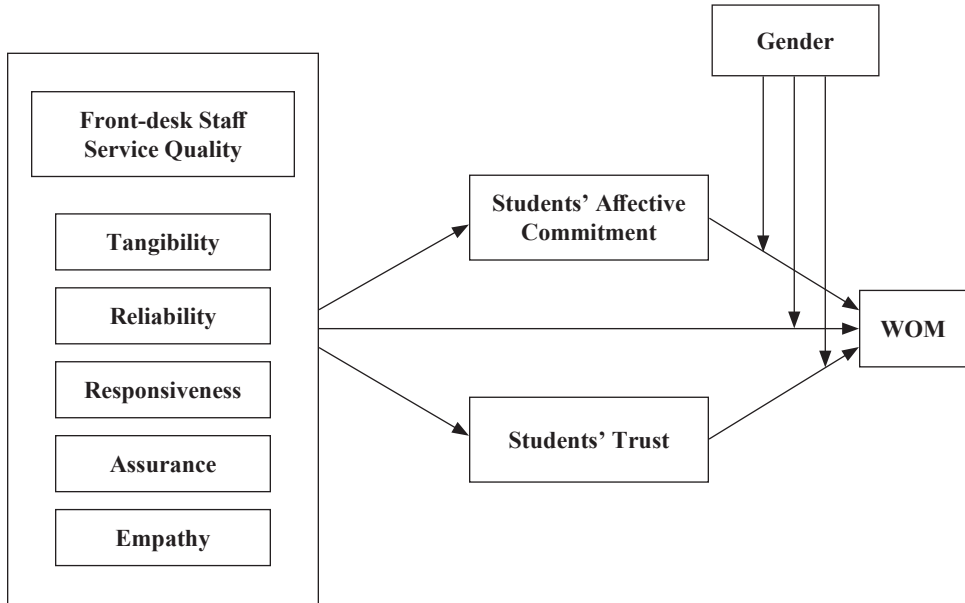


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Data Collection and Instruments

This research is based on the quantitative data collected through questionnaires. The data collection instrument was developed using a 5-point Likert-scale that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Further, the items were adapted from the prior literature. The front-desk staff service quality items have been adapted (Boulding et al., 1993; Hampton, 1993). Items of students' affective commitment were taken from Harrison-Walker (2001). Additionally, items of students' trust were adapted from Cho and Hu (2009), while WOM items were adapted from Jalilvand et al. (2017).

We collected the data from students by using a convenience sampling approach, data were collected in Pakistan, and the targeted population was the students of private universities. Also, we used a quantitative approach because after collecting quantifiable data, we applied statistical techniques, as the results of these techniques can be generalised easily. In convenience sampling, the selection of units from the population is based on easy availability, willingness to participate, and accessibility. Thus, in this study, we used a convenience

sampling technique because we collected the data from students who were available at that time, and it was easy for us to access them. Therefore, 415 respondents participated in the survey, but after data screening, 13 were deleted because of missing and incomplete values. The final sample size used in the study was 402; thus, the effective response rate is 97%. The sample size is based on the recommended sample size by Hejase and Hejase (2013). We have used the famous statistical sample calculation formula (Hejase & Hejase, 2013) as it justifies our sample easily:

$$n = [z][z][p][q] / [e][e] \text{ where } z = 1.96 \text{ [95\% statistical confidence];}$$
$$p = q = 0.50$$

Assuming equal gender division of your sample [men and women]; the error term e is 5% [sought error estimate], the results is 384 persons. We have 402 which is well justified for our research.

G-Power Analysis

In the present paper, we have applied the G-Power analysis to justify the sample size. It helps form a better understanding of the participants that how many participants do researcher needs to achieve a particular level of power with respect to the experiment (Verma & Verma, 2020). The results depict that 40 is the sample size requirement, and our sample consists of 402 respondents; thus, it is more than sufficient and fulfilling the criteria.

Table 1

[1] -- *Wednesday, November 11, 2020 -- 12:00:32*

t-test – Linear multiple regression: Fixed model, single regression coefficient

Analysis:	A priori: Compute required sample size	
Input:	Tail (s)	= Two
	Effect size f^2	= 0.35
	α err prob	= 0.05
	Power ($1-\beta$ err prob)	= 0.95
	Number of predictors	= 8
Output:	Noncentrality parameter δ	= 3.7416574
	Critical t	= 2.0395134
	Df	= 31
	Total sample size	= 40
	Actual power	= 0.9518894

Demographics

A sample of 402 valid responses was collected from private university students. Table 2 shows that 233 are males (58%) and 169 are females (42%) from different fields. The students' age below 20 years old is 52.2%, 17.7% of students are aged between 21 to 25 years old, 21.6% of the students have their ages range between 26 to 30 years old, and 8.5% are aged more than 30 years old. In addition to that, 75.1% of the students are single, whereas 24.9% are married. Additionally, educational level data shows that the larger sections of the students are either undergraduates (61.9%), 20.4% are graduates, 9.7% are postgraduates, while 8% are in others' options.

Table 2
Respondents' profile (N = 402)

Demographic items	Frequency	Percentile
Gender		
Male	233	58.0
Female	169	42.0
Age		
Below 20 years old	210	52.2
21–25 years old	71	17.7
26–30 years old	87	21.6
More than 30 years old	34	8.5
Education		
Undergraduates	249	61.9
Graduates	82	20.4
Postgraduates	39	9.7
Other	32	8.0

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique was applied to the data using Smart PLS version 3.2.3 (Ringle et al., 2015; Qazi et al., 2020a). The study used a bootstrapping technique on a sample of 402 respondents (Hair et al., 2011). The measurement model and structural model are evaluated through this technique. Therefore, PLS-SEM modeling techniques are sufficient for this analysis as this study used a complex structure, and this methodology is also capable of correctly estimating the test sample (Hair et al., 2011; Henseler et al., 2015; Raza et al., 2020c). Another advantage

is that the association between latent variables is also described by this method. Additionally, through the improvement of hidden constructs, it can deduce the measurement error.

Measurement Model

The validity of the model is evaluated by the (i) construct reliability, (ii) individual item reliability, (iii) convergent validity, and (iv) discriminant validity.

As seen in Table 3, all the variables have Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, greater than 0.7, which meets Straub's criteria (1989). The individual reliability of all the variables is greater than 0.7, following Churchill's criteria (1979). According to Raza et al. (2020b), each loading has to be greater than 0.7. Any value that is below 0.4 should be excluded. In this article, instrument reliability is confirmed as all loadings are higher than and equal to 0.7. The convergent validity was evaluated through average variance extracted (AVE), and all variables have a minimum value of 0.50, which meets the benchmark proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Table 3
Measurement model

	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Front-desk staff service quality	FDSSQ1	0.834	0.944	0.951	0.581
	FDSSQ2	0.833			
	FDSSQ3	0.747			
	FDSSQ4	0.731			
	FDSSQ5	0.738			
	FDSSQ6	0.728			
	FDSSQ7	0.712			
	FDSSQ8	0.703			
	FDSSQ9	0.847			
	FDSSQ10	0.738			
	FDSSQ11	0.732			
	FDSSQ12	0.741			

(continued on next page)

Table 3: (continued)

	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Student's affective commitment	SAC1	0.834			
	SAC2	0.856			
	SAC3	0.850	0.904	0.929	0.723
	SAC4	0.840			
	SAC5	0.870			
Student's trust	ST1	0.899			
	ST2	0.842	0.801	0.883	0.717
	ST3	0.796			
WOM	WOM1	0.732			
	WOM2	0.841			
	WOM3	0.816			
	WOM4	0.873	0.882	0.914	0.681
	WOM5	0.856			

Note: FDSSQ = front-desk service quality, SAC = students' affective commitment, ST = students' trust, WOM = word-of-mouth

Table 4 represents the square root of AVE in the diagonal form. It also meets the criteria of Fornell and Larcker (1981), which state that values must be the square root of AVE and higher than the correlation between the variables. As seen in Table 5, each construct's items are loaded higher in their relevant constructs than the other constructs. The cross-loading difference is also higher than the recommended criteria of 0.1 (Gefen & Straub, 2005). Thus, it explains the discriminant validity of adequacy. Table 6 denotes heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) analysis. Some authors suggest a threshold of 0.85 (Raza et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). Also, Gold et al. (2001) argued with it and proposed a value of 0.90. Hence, all values of HTMT are equal and less than 0.90 (Qazi et al., 2020b).

Table 4

Discriminant validity

	FDSQ	SAC	ST	WOM
FDSQ	0.762			
SAC	0.678	0.850		
ST	0.751	0.671	0.846	
WOM	0.618	0.800	0.665	0.825

Table 5

Loadings and cross loadings

	FDSSQ	SAC	ST	WOM
FDSSQ1	0.834	0.517	0.618	0.425
FDSSQ2	0.833	0.535	0.621	0.495
FDSSQ3	0.747	0.578	0.680	0.543
FDSSQ4	0.731	0.579	0.628	0.507
FDSSQ5	0.738	0.602	0.673	0.603
FDSSQ6	0.728	0.456	0.422	0.415
FDSSQ7	0.712	0.440	0.471	0.417
FDSSQ8	0.703	0.455	0.458	0.398
FDSSQ9	0.847	0.569	0.610	0.511
FDSSQ10	0.738	0.586	0.669	0.494
FDSSQ11	0.732	0.508	0.549	0.485
FDSSQ12	0.741	0.121	0.194	0.139
SAC1	0.624	0.834	0.607	0.628
SAC2	0.584	0.856	0.595	0.716
SAC3	0.584	0.850	0.583	0.674
SAC4	0.526	0.840	0.534	0.742
SAC5	0.604	0.869	0.570	0.683
ST1	0.747	0.623	0.907	0.577
ST2	0.593	0.579	0.842	0.619
ST3	0.269	0.154	0.796	0.531
WOM1	0.409	0.360	0.458	0.732
WOM2	0.572	0.693	0.588	0.841
WOM3	0.464	0.695	0.580	0.816
WOM4	0.526	0.734	0.572	0.873
WOM5	0.559	0.721	0.533	0.856

Table 6
HTMT ratio

	FDSSQ	SAC	ST	WOM
FDSSQ				
SAC	0.758			
ST	0.857	0.874		
WOM	0.700	0.892	0.904	

The measurement model confirms the convergent and discriminant validity; thus, it can examine the structural model.

Structural Model

Table 7 illustrates the path analysis outcomes. It shows that every path represents a correlation to the hypothesis. The greater impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable depends on the higher coefficient value. However, the study hypothesis are supported by focusing on the level of significance, which is 0.05.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, the coefficient of paths connecting service quality dimensions (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) with students' affective commitment and students' trust is positive and significant, hence supporting H1 and H2, respectively. Additionally, the path connecting students' affective commitment and WOM are positive and significant (H3). In contrast, the path connecting students' trust and WOM is positive and significant (H4). Also, H5 demonstrates a positive but insignificant relationship between the quality of service dimensions of the front-desk staff and WOM. Whereas H6 and H7 represent the mediation analysis, results reveal that students' affective commitment and student trustfully mediate the relationship between front-desk staff service quality and WOM. Lastly, H8, H9, and H10 portray the moderating effect of gender. Moreover, all *t*-values are greater than the critical value, i.e., 1.96, and *p*-values are smaller than 0.05, all hypotheses are significant and accepted, but H5 is not significant.

Table 7
Results of path analysis

Hypothesis	Regression path	Effect type	B-coefficients	t-value	p-value	Remarks
H1	FDSSQ → SAC	Direct effect	0.704	29.496	0.000	Supported
H2	FDSSQ → ST	Direct effect	0.753	23.757	0.000	Supported
H3	SAC → WOM	Direct effect	0.613	13.684	0.000	Supported
H4	ST → WOM	Direct effect	0.199	4.351	0.001	Supported
H5	FDSSQ → WOM	Direct effect	0.058	0.293	0.330	Not Supported

DISCUSSION

All paths between independent and dependent constructs are positively and significantly related, as illustrated by the above results. All hypothesis are statistically significant and accepted, but H5 is not statistically significant and is therefore rejected. The linking path of front-desk staff service quality with students’ affective commitment is positive and significant ($B = 0.704, p < 0.05, t = 29.496$), supporting H1. Our research results are consistent with prior researchers’ results (Iglesias et al., 2019; Ngoma & Ntale, 2019; Chenet et al., 2010). Therefore, it is concluded that front-desk service quality is positively and significantly linked with students’ affective commitment. The better the services will ultimately result in more emotional attachment. So, when private universities get quality services and assistance from the front-desk staff, it boosts students’ commitment. The service quality satisfies students of private universities that, after paying high fees, are getting quality education along with the best services. This satisfaction fosters their commitment level.

Correspondingly, the path connecting front-desk staff service quality and students’ trust is positive and significant ($B = 0.753, p < 0.05, t = 23.757$), supporting H2, and the result is supported by past studies (Chenet et al., 2010; Boonlertvanich, 2019; Fauzi & Suryani, 2019). It shows that universities can develop trust among students by providing good quality services. Moreover, the staff’s best services and helpful nature form a special bond between students and the university staff. Hence, it develops trust, and students also depict a positive attitude.

The path connecting students’ affective commitment and WOM is also positive and significant ($B = 0.613, p < 0.05, t = 13.684$), supporting H3. This result has been supported by various other literature (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2003; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011; Li & Chang, 2016; Chen & Yuan, 2020;

Cownie, 2019b). Hence students' affective commitment can have a significant impact on WOM. Moreover, highly committed students spread positive WOM among their homogenous and heterogeneous groups. Students mostly make comparisons, and when students are effectively committed to their universities, they eventually spread positive WOM. Also, the results depict the importance of affective commitment as a driver of positive WOM. Thus, committed students are the real assets for the university as they help in attracting new students. Also, boost the positive image by positive WOM.

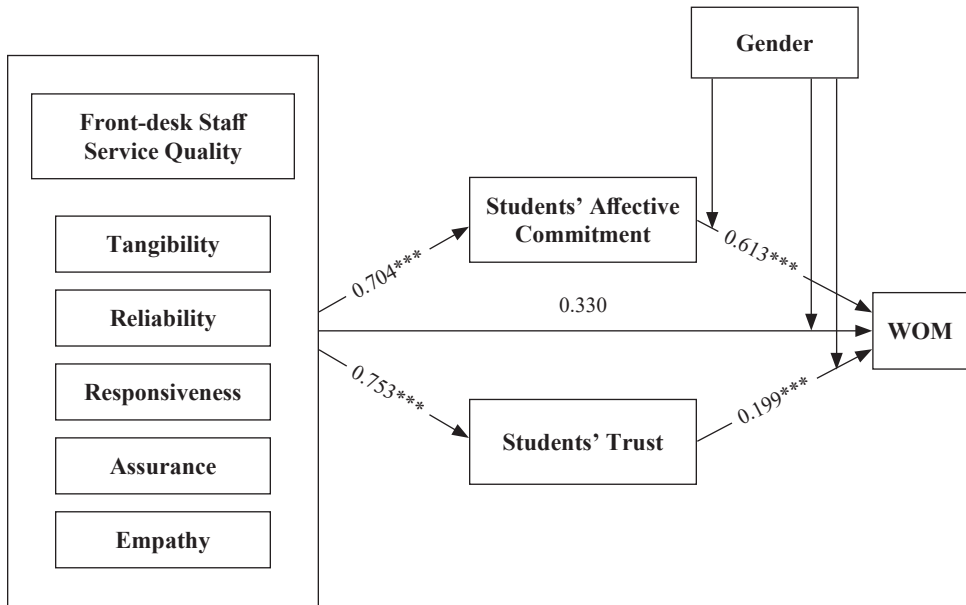


Figure 2. Results of path analysis

Furthermore, the fourth hypothesis is also accepted as students' trust is positively and significantly associated with WOM ($B = 0.199, p < 0.05, t = 4.351$). Many researchers revealed similar results (Kassim & Abdullah, 2010; Islam & Rahman, 2016; Lee & Hong, 2019). The works portray that when students start trusting their university, so they recommend that to their family, friends, and relatives; thus, positive attributes keep spreading from one person to another. The study of Jalilvand et al. (2017) also supports the result. Therefore, students' trust has a positive and significant influence on WOM, and when trust increases, WOM also increases.

The fifth hypothesis depicts a positive but insignificant relationship between front-desk staff service quality and WOM ($B = 0.058, p > 0.05, t = 0.293$). It means that the front-desk staff service quality impacts WOM positively. Still, it is not that much effective because, in the present study, students' affective commitment and students' trust are used as a mediator. Thus, for positive WOM, it is crucial to develop commitment and trust among students. Service quality will create a good image in students' eyes, but trust and commitment will foster WOM (Rather et al., 2019; Cownie, 2019b). Moreover, Table 8 illustrates the results of H6 and H7, i.e., students' affective commitment and students' trust completely mediate the relationship between front-desk staff service quality and WOM as ($B = 0.432, p < 0.05, t = 12.277$) ($B = 0.150, p < 0.05, t = 0.242$) respectively. The results are consistent with past literature (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008; Sunarsih, 2018; Jalilvand et al., 2017). It shows that the role of students' affective commitment and students' trust is crucial. However, directly service quality is positively associated with WOM. Still, it is essential to provide students with the best services to have trust and commitment to their university. Additionally, trust and commitment build a sense of belonging, which is a useful tool of WOM.

The research model is tested to evaluate the moderating effect of gender. Table 9 reveals that the relationship between front-desk staff service quality and WOM is weaker by the moderating role of gender ($B = -0.250, p < 0.05$). The relationship among students' affective commitment and WOM is stronger with the moderating effect of gender ($B = 0.134, p < 0.05$), hence H8 and H9 are accepted. It means that gender moderates the relationship between students' affective commitment and students' trust. Additionally, the relationship between students' trust and WOM is not affected by gender ($B = 0.066, p > 0.05$); hence H10 is not accepted. It means that there is no moderating role of gender between students' trust and WOM.

Table 8
Results of mediating analysis

Hypothesis	Regression path	Effect type	B-coefficients	t-value	p-value	Remarks
H6	FDSSQ → SAC → WOM	Indirect effect	0.432	12.277	0.000	Full mediation
H7	FDSSQ → ST → WOM	Indirect effect	0.150	4.242	0.002	Full mediation

Table 9
Moderating effect of gender

Hypothesis	Regression path	Original sample	Gender	p-value
		B	β	
H8	FDSSQ → WOM	0.058	-0.250	0.000
H9	SAC → WOM	0.613	0.134	0.008
H10	ST → WOM	0.199	0.066	0.278

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Front-desk officers are the first persons who make the first impression on almost everyone. It makes front-desk officers the public face of an organisation. In private universities, front-desk staff plays a vital role as the number of students interacts with them daily. This research aims to analyse the impact of front-desk staff service quality on students’ trust and commitment than on WOM. Hence, we targeted the students of higher education. The front-desk staff service quality is used as an independent variable and WOM as a dependent variable. Although students’ affective commitment and trust are incorporated as mediators, gender is used as a moderator. These factors are never studied frequently in universities’ context and added in-depth knowledge for universities by using the commitment-trust theory model. Since the study of the impact of WOM is a pioneer work (Nusair, 2007); therefore, this study offers significant benefits for future studies. We collected the data through a survey-based questionnaire, while the SEM technique is used. After the analysis, it is revealed that when students receive good services from the front-desk officers, it ultimately fosters the students’ trust and commitment. Students are the essential stakeholders for private universities; hence, they want a rapid response to their queries. So, quality services help in building trust and commitment. Once students’ trust is developed and they depict commitment, then they spread positive WOM. Also, mediation analyses depict the full mediation, and it means that it is necessary first to build trust and commitment. Lastly, our study indicates the moderating role of gender between the proposed associations, but no moderating effect is found between students’ trust and WOM.

Managerial Implications

The research provides a statistically firm ground, specifically for the university and policymakers' management, to specify specific strategies for the university's front-desk staff's effectiveness. This research acts as a motivator towards adopting excellent responsiveness between universities and students. To enhance front-desk staff service quality, this study allows policymakers to develop effective procedures and policies.

According to Qiu et al. (2019), authentic leadership improves service quality because charismatic leaders motivate members to perform efficiently. Hence, it is recommended to create a team led by a leader who encourages front-desk officers to actively respond to students' queries. Also, train them in the norms of culture. This team should include team leaders and trainers the professional front-desk staff instructors, to provide help and directions to the front-desk officers. Additionally, human need to understand human psychology because it assists in public dealing. Also, Jimenez et al. (2016) argued that psychology education and training are crucial in the present era. Hence, it is suggested that universities' management should pay more attention to the factors related to the students' psychology as their officers mostly interact with students, so they need to get training from the psychologist as well. It will help understand an individual's mind; thus, staff will treat students according to their minds. Also, students want a quick response from the staff, so management needs to hire experienced personnel to entertain them quickly. There is a need to opt-in five crucial service quality dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (El Alfy & Abukari, 2020). Management should provide effective communication training to the front desk staff to learn the basic etiquette of greetings and humbleness.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

This study has the following limitations. First, the data collection involves the students who are part of the private university only. Secondly, limited variables have been used to study the impact of service quality on WOM. In the future, some other variables can be incorporated, such as university image, loyalty, and career development. Thirdly, in the present research, we talked about only front-desk officers. However, in universities, other departments also deal with students; thus, student affairs, administration, and event management can be targeted for the research.

Based on the above discussion, this study provides some recommendations. Firstly, the model of commitment and trust theory and the SERVQUAL model applied in this study. Hence, in the context of the university's front-desk staff, the ability of commitment and trust theory model may enhance through explanatory variables. These factors may include the dimensions of front-desk staff service quality, students' affective commitment, students' trust, and WOM. Secondly, scholars should perform a comparative analysis between public and private institutions to provide better insight.

Additionally, it is recommended to highlight students' perceptions about taking admissions in private universities to increase higher education literature. Furthermore, this study is based on convenience sampling, so future researchers might use other measures and techniques to determine the student's perception regarding service quality and WOM. Lastly, it is recommended to conduct a mixed approach, i.e., quantitative and qualitative to provide new insights regarding the front-desk staff's services.

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