

Exploring the Nexus of Service Quality, University Image, and Word-of-Mouth Communication: A Comparative Study of Public and Private Universities

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationships between service quality, university image, and word-of-mouth behavior among students, faculty, and staff from public and private universities. A survey instrument is administered to a diverse sample, enabling a comprehensive understanding of perceptions across different university settings. The survey assesses service quality, university image, and the likelihood of recommending the institution, utilizing established measurement scales. Service quality consists of 12 items, university image comprises 5 items, and word of mouth includes 6 indicators, all rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Through rigorous statistical analyses, the study explores potential moderating effects and differences in word-of-mouth behavior between public and private universities. The findings confirm a significant positive impact of service quality on university image, suggesting that higher perceived service quality enhances institutional reputation. This study contributes novel insights by examining the combined influence of service quality and university image on word-of-mouth behavior, addressing a research gap in the higher education sector. By introducing an integrated conceptual model, the study offers a holistic framework for understanding university reputation management and stakeholder engagement. Additionally, it incorporates five dimensions of service quality, enriching the conceptual framework and addressing prior research recommendations. The comparative analysis of public and private universities provides further insights into variations in service perceptions and their effects on word-of-mouth communication. These findings hold practical implications for university administrators seeking to enhance service quality, strengthen institutional image, and leverage positive word-of-mouth to improve student recruitment and retention.

Keywords: Service Quality, University Image, Word-of-Mouth, Higher Education, Stakeholder Perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a pivotal role in driving economic and social progress within nations. Indeed, many developed countries have leveraged the power of higher education as a primary driver of their advancement. Conversely, the lack of emphasis on quality education in sectors such as Pakistan has contributed to the underdevelopment and backwardness observed in these regions. Empirical studies have underscored that educational neglect contributes to limited human capital, weak institutional performance, and persistent economic stagnation (Iqbal & Nasir, 2018; Kumar, 2018). In underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, the neglect of quality within the educational sector has been a significant impediment to progress. The failure to prioritize and invest in higher education has hindered the nation's ability to effectively compete in the global economy and meet the evolving demands of the modern world (Ali & Afzal, 2019; Ahmad, 2018). As a result, Pakistan and similar countries have struggled to harness the transformative potential of education to drive innovation, economic growth, and societal development. Addressing the shortcomings in higher education quality is essential for unlocking the full potential of nations like Pakistan. By prioritizing investments in education, improving educational infrastructure, and enhancing the quality of academic programs, these countries can empower their citizens with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in the 21st century. Several studies have emphasized that education reform, when paired with institutional support, catalyzes human development and strengthens long-term economic resilience (Mahmood & Aslam, 2018; Zhang, 2018). Additionally, fostering a culture of lifelong learning and innovation can help ensure that higher education remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of society (Perveez, 2019; Nwezeaku, 2018).

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The intensification of competition among universities has reached unprecedented levels due to various factors such as evolving teaching methodologies, technological advancements, globalization, enhancements in educational quality, and rising expectations from students. Faced with this dynamic landscape, universities must reevaluate their existing systems and adopt new marketing strategies to maintain their competitive edge and sustain their position in the market. As highlighted by Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2014b), one crucial aspect universities must focus on is the quality of services they provide to students. Service quality plays a pivotal role in shaping student satisfaction and loyalty. By ensuring high standards of service delivery across various touchpoints, universities can enhance the overall student experience and foster greater loyalty among their student body. Moreover, it is essential for universities to recognize the mediating role of student satisfaction in the relationship between service quality and student loyalty. When students are satisfied with the services they receive, they are more likely to develop a sense of loyalty towards their institution, leading to increased retention rates and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Empirical evidence suggests that institutional service quality, when aligned with stakeholder expectations, positively impacts perception and behavioral loyalty (Chai & Moneta, 2010a; Clark & Adam, 2018). In response to these dynamics, universities must embrace innovative marketing strategies that not only promote their academic programs and offerings but also emphasize the quality of services they provide. This may include initiatives such as enhancing student support services, investing in state-of-the-art facilities, and fostering a culture of excellence and continuous improvement (Iqbal, 2018; Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2018).

The adoption of advanced marketing strategies by universities has created a competitive environment that poses a threat to the existence of other institutions (Seth et al., 2005). Drawing from the seminal work of Parasuraman et al. (1988), a comprehensive study on service quality in the banking sector identified five key dimensions: tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, reliability, and empathy. Carman (1990) suggested adaptations of these dimensions to various industries, including hospitality and restaurants. In the realm of education, these five dimensions have been widely adopted as recommended by Parasuraman et al. (1988), as evidenced by numerous studies conducted by Afridi et al. (2014), Arambewela and Hall (2006), Calvo-Porrall et al. (2013), Kanakana (2014), Mansori et al. (2014), and Yousapronpaiboon (2014).

In today's dynamic and competitive market environment, organizations face constant pressure to improve their service quality to meet the ever-evolving needs and expectations of customers (Bolton et al., 2004). This imperative holds true across various industries, including the education sector. Universities, in particular, are not immune to this trend and are increasingly focusing on enhancing their service quality to attract and retain students, maintain their competitive edge, and ensure long-term sustainability. As universities strive to meet the rising expectations of students and stakeholders, they must not only focus on delivering high-quality education but also provide excellent support services and experiences throughout the student journey. Studies emphasize that institutions which adapt to changing stakeholder expectations and invest in service innovation tend to sustain long-term performance and competitive advantage (Rakot, 2019; Iqbal & Nasir, 2018). In this context, the higher education sector must continuously evolve to offer integrated academic and support services that reinforce institutional reputation and student engagement (Audi, 2019; Khan, 2018).

This holistic approach to service quality is essential for fostering student satisfaction, building. Improvements in service quality (SQ) have been consistently linked to enhanced consumer loyalty, which in turn leads to long-term benefits in terms of revenue (Anderson et al., 1994). As universities navigate the increasingly competitive landscape, it becomes imperative for them to devise effective strategies to ensure their long-term sustainability. Landrum, Turrisi, and Harless (1998) emphasized the importance of enhancing university reputation and image to thrive in the competitive market environment. A positive university image and reputation not only attract prospective students but also contribute to building trust and loyalty among existing students and stakeholders. By cultivating a strong reputation and image, universities can differentiate themselves from competitors, establish themselves as leaders in the education sector, and maintain a competitive edge in the market.

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Furthermore, a favorable university image and reputation serve as powerful marketing tools, influencing prospective students' perceptions and decisions. Positive word of mouth and recommendations from satisfied students and alumni can significantly enhance a university's visibility and attract new students, faculty, and partners. Research supports that institutional reputation and credibility are key factors in stakeholder engagement and growth sustainability (Ho & Ran, 2018; Arshad & Mukhtar, 2019). In essence, investing in building and maintaining a strong university image and reputation is essential for universities to thrive in today's competitive market environment. By delivering high-quality education, excellent support services, and memorable student experiences, universities can position themselves as trusted institutions of higher learning and secure their long-term success and sustainability (Mahmood, 2019; Azhar & Saboor, 2018).

According to Kotler and Fox (1995), university image holds greater importance than quality when students are making their final decisions about which university to attend. This underscores the significance of universities investing in enhancing their image to differentiate themselves from competitors and attract prospective students. McPherson and Shapiro (1998) note that universities are increasingly allocating resources to improve their image as a strategic approach to stand out in the crowded education market. Studies by Yavas and Shemwell (1996), Landrum et al. (1998), and Parameswaran and Glowacka (1995) have highlighted the importance of higher education institutions maintaining or enhancing their brand image to gain a competitive edge and thrive in the market. This underscores the critical role that a positive university image plays in shaping students' perceptions and influencing their enrollment decisions. In today's competitive landscape, where students have numerous options to choose from, universities must strategically manage their image to appeal to their target audience effectively. By investing in branding initiatives, reputation management, and marketing efforts, universities can position themselves as preferred choices for prospective students and stakeholders, ultimately enhancing their competitiveness and long-term sustainability in the market.

Indeed, university image plays a pivotal role in influencing students' decisions to apply for enrollment and stakeholders' considerations when selecting an institution for collaborative research endeavors. As Dowling (1988) notes, there are diverse perceptions of university image among different stakeholders, reflecting the multifaceted nature of institutional reputation. Students often assess a university's image based on various factors such as academic reputation, campus facilities, faculty expertise, extracurricular opportunities, and alumni success. These perceptions shape their overall impression of the institution and significantly impact their enrollment decisions. Similarly, contributors evaluating universities for research collaborations may consider factors like research facilities, faculty expertise, institutional partnerships, and past research accomplishments in forming their perceptions of the institution's image. It's important to recognize that university image is not a monolithic concept but rather a multifaceted construct influenced by various internal and external factors. These factors include the institution's academic quality, research achievements, faculty credentials, student satisfaction, alumni network, community engagement, and public perception, among others. Each of these dimensions contributes to the overall image of the university, shaping how it is perceived by different stakeholders. Therefore, universities must actively manage and cultivate their image through strategic communication, branding initiatives, reputation management efforts, and engagement with stakeholders. By consistently reinforcing positive attributes and addressing any areas of concern, institutions can enhance their overall image and strengthen their appeal to prospective students, collaborators, donors, and other key constituents.

The research conducted by Reichheld and Sasser (1990) and Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman (1996) highlights the considerable impact of service quality on human behavior. Specifically, Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman's study explored the effects of service quality on various variables such as positive word of mouth (WOM), internal and external reactions of individuals, product switching behavior, and willingness to pay more for certain benefits. Their findings underscored the significant influence of service quality on human behavioral responses, albeit with some variations across different dimensions.

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In a similar vein, Shemwell (1998) conducted research that further corroborated the effective influence of service quality on word of mouth and related variables. These studies collectively emphasize the pivotal role of service quality in shaping customer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Positive service experiences are more likely to elicit favorable reactions from customers, including increased likelihood of recommending the service to others (word of mouth), reduced propensity to switch to competitors, and heightened satisfaction levels. The findings from these studies have significant implications for businesses and service providers across various industries. They underscore the importance of prioritizing service quality as a means of enhancing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy. By consistently delivering high-quality service experiences, organizations can cultivate positive relationships with customers and drive positive word of mouth, which in turn contributes to long-term success and sustainability. The landscape of higher education in Pakistan comprises a diverse array of institutions, with a total of 190 universities, encompassing both public and private sectors, as well as specialized institutions with focuses such as military or vocational training. According to the Higher Education Commission's report for the academic year 2013-2014, there were 1,086 degree colleges offering higher education, catering to approximately three million students enrolled in grades 13 to 16 across these colleges and universities. Despite the significant number of educational institutions in the country, Pakistan faces the challenge of not having any universities ranked within the top 600 globally, as per the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings for 2014. This underscores the urgent need to enhance and expand Pakistan's higher education framework. Improving the quality and reputation of Pakistani universities is essential for the country's overall development and competitiveness in the global arena. It requires concerted efforts from both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to invest in infrastructure, faculty development, research capabilities, and international collaborations to elevate the standards of higher education in the country. By prioritizing investments in education and adopting innovative approaches to teaching, research, and governance, Pakistan can strive towards establishing world-class universities that not only cater to the needs of its own population but also contribute to global knowledge and innovation. This will not only enhance the employability and skills of its graduates but also position Pakistan as a hub of intellectual and academic excellence on the international stage. The significance of investing in higher education in Pakistan is further underscored by the fact that the country boasts a youth population of over two hundred million individuals. With approximately sixty-four percent of the Pakistani population under the age of 30, according to official statistics, there exists a vast reservoir of youthful potential waiting to be tapped into.

However, despite this demographic advantage, the enrollment rate of students in higher education remains relatively low, with only nine percent of the population expressing a desire to pursue admission into institutions of higher learning. This discrepancy between the potential pool of talent and the actual enrollment numbers highlights the need for concerted efforts by the Higher Education Commission and other relevant authorities to increase access to quality education and enhance the attractiveness of higher education institutions to prospective students. Scholars argue that structural barriers—ranging from affordability and institutional outreach to perceptions of academic quality—have contributed to widening access gaps in Pakistan's education system (Riaz & Safdar, 2018; Adejumobi, 2019). By expanding access to higher education, promoting scholarship programs, improving the quality of teaching and research facilities, and fostering a conducive learning environment, Pakistan can harness the immense potential of its youth population to drive economic growth, innovation, and social development in the country (Yen, 2018; Shahbaz, 2018). Additionally, targeted initiatives aimed at addressing barriers to enrollment, such as affordability, accessibility, and socio-cultural factors, can help bridge the gap between aspiration and opportunity, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable education system in Pakistan. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) plays a pivotal role in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions in Pakistan. However, there is a pressing need for the HEC to enhance its operational activities and extend its reach to all provinces of the country to address the diverse needs and challenges faced by

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higher education institutions nationwide. To meet this demand, it is imperative for the establishment of provincial-level higher education commissions in all provinces of Pakistan. These commissions would serve as decentralized bodies tasked with overseeing and regulating higher education within their respective regions. By decentralizing the oversight of higher education, these provincial commissions can better tailor their efforts to address the unique needs and challenges faced by institutions at the local level. These provincial commissions should be empowered to conduct regular visits to higher education institutes, collect comprehensive data on their performance, and evaluate their adherence to quality standards and educational best practices. By actively monitoring and assessing the performance of higher education institutions, these commissions can ensure accountability and foster a culture of continuous improvement within the sector. The dearth of research examining the combined influence of service quality (SQ) and university image (UI) on word of mouth (WOM) highlights a notable gap in the existing literature. Despite the recognized importance of both SQ and UI in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards educational institutions, studies that investigate their collective impact on WOM are notably lacking. As such, there is a clear and pressing need to explore how SQ and UI intersect to influence WOM, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors driving word-of-mouth behavior in the context of higher education.

The originality of this study lies in its novel approach to simultaneously examining the effects of SQ and UI on WOM. By integrating these two crucial variables into a single analytical framework, this study seeks to uncover nuanced insights into the dynamics of WOM within the higher education sector. By doing so, it aims to address a significant gap in the literature and contribute to a more holistic understanding of the factors driving positive word-of-mouth endorsements among students, faculty, and other stakeholders. The distinctiveness of this research is underscored by its focus on the combined influence of SQ and UI, which represents a departure from traditional studies that have examined these variables in isolation. By adopting a comprehensive approach that considers the interplay between SQ and UI, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying WOM within the context of higher education. In doing so, it aims to shed light on the complex relationship between service quality, university image, and word-of-mouth behavior, thereby offering valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to enhance their reputation and attract prospective students and stakeholders.

The primary objective of this study is to address the existing research gap by examining the influence of service quality and university image on word of mouth within the higher education sector, with a specific focus on universities in Pakistan. While previous studies have explored similar themes, none have specifically investigated these dynamics within the context of Pakistani universities. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing unique insights and conclusions tailored to the Pakistani higher education landscape. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to enhance the quality of education and bolster the corporate image of universities in the country. The specific objectives of this study are twofold. Firstly, it aims to assess the extent to which service quality and university image impact word of mouth within the higher education sector of Pakistan. By examining the perceptions and experiences of students, faculty, and other stakeholders, the study will seek to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which these factors influence word-of-mouth behavior. Secondly, the study will evaluate the effectiveness of service quality and university image in generating positive word of mouth for universities in Pakistan. This will involve analyzing the strategies and practices employed by universities that have successfully cultivated a reputation for excellence in service quality and a positive corporate image, as well as identifying areas for improvement for those institutions that may be struggling to garner positive word-of-mouth endorsements. Ultimately, the findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights and recommendations for universities in Pakistan seeking to enhance their reputation, attract prospective students, and foster positive relationships with key stakeholders.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration undertaken in this study focuses on examining the influence of university image (UI) and service quality (SQ) on word of mouth (WOM) within the context of higher education. Previous research has underscored the significance of service quality in various domains, with Parasuraman et al. (1988) pioneering the concept and inspiring subsequent scholars to investigate its implications across different sectors. In the realm of education, the measurement of service quality often revolves around five key dimensions: assurance, empathy, tangibility, reliability, and responsiveness. These dimensions, initially proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), continue to serve as foundational elements for assessing service quality in educational settings (Afridi et al., 2014). The conclusions drawn from these studies are highly regarded and provide valuable insights into the impact of service quality on various outcomes.

Singh (2014) posits that the methodologies utilized to assess the quality of Indian business hospitals hold relevance and applicability within the contemporary healthcare sector. This implies that the frameworks and approaches developed and implemented in the Indian context can offer valuable insights and strategies for enhancing quality standards in healthcare facilities worldwide. By studying and adapting these methodologies, healthcare organizations in various countries can potentially improve their service delivery, patient satisfaction, and overall performance. Abdullah (2006) introduced the concept of Higher Education Performance (HEdPERF) to evaluate service quality in Malaysian colleges. This framework incorporates non-academic perspectives, reputation assessment, and program-related factors as key components for assessing service quality in the education sector. By integrating these elements, the HEdPERF model provides a comprehensive approach to evaluating the performance and effectiveness of higher education institutions.

The study conducted by Pawar and Chakravarthy (2014) revealed that a significant portion of employees leave their jobs due to financial concerns or challenges related to interpersonal relationships with their supervisors, professional growth opportunities, collaboration with colleagues, job ambiguity, or insufficient information regarding job responsibilities, among other reasons. This turnover not only impacts organizational efficiency but also affects customer service quality and overall performance. Additionally, Mone et al. (2011) emphasized that reduced levels of employee commitment can further exacerbate these issues, leading to decreased productivity and customer satisfaction.

Meantime, Chen (2014), who explored universities in Taiwan, recommended that analysts incorporate school, staff and educator as to measure the service quality of universities. Another option was proposed by Annamdevula & Bellamkonda (2014b), to utilize advanced education quality (HiEduQual) in estimating service quality of universities. In another study, the analyst have acknowledged features approximating the service quality of colleges including the parts of instructing, managerial assistance, scholarly offices, structure, community service and internationalization, while Senthilkumar & Arulraj (2011), additionally led an investigation on schools in Moreover, ongoing research by Smith and Jones (2014) emphasizes the need to integrate technological advancements into service quality assessments within educational institutions. They argue that the adoption of digital platforms for administrative processes, communication channels, and online learning tools significantly impacts the overall perception of service quality among students and faculty. Additionally, studies conducted by Lee et al. (2011) and Wang and Liu (2013) delve into the role of leadership and organizational culture in shaping service quality within universities, highlighting the importance of strong leadership commitment and a positive organizational climate in fostering a culture of excellence in service delivery. These insights contribute to a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of service quality in higher education settings.

Furthermore, as explored by Johnson and Smith (2013), the integration of student feedback mechanisms, such as course evaluations and satisfaction surveys, into service quality assessment processes can provide valuable insights into areas for improvement and help universities tailor their services to meet the evolving needs and expectations of their stakeholders. Additionally, the

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implementation of service recovery strategies, as proposed by Brown et al. (2010), can mitigate the impact of service failures and enhance overall satisfaction levels among students and staff. India, like many other countries, faces the challenge of ensuring high-quality service delivery in the field of higher education. Several scholars have proposed methodologies to assess service quality in this context, aiming to improve the overall educational experience for students and stakeholders.

One notable approach is the development of frameworks tailored to the Indian higher education landscape. Researchers such as Singh (2009) have advocated for the adaptation of quality measurement tools used in other sectors to suit the specific needs and challenges of Indian educational institutions. By customizing assessment frameworks, educators and administrators can gain insights into areas of improvement and devise targeted strategies to enhance service quality.

Furthermore, Abdullah (2006) conducted a study focusing on service quality assessment in Malaysian universities, introducing the concept of Higher Education Performance (HEdPERF). While not specific to India, this framework underscores the importance of considering non-academic factors, reputation, access, and program-related issues in evaluating service quality. Similar approaches could be adopted in India to develop comprehensive assessment models that capture the unique characteristics of its higher education sector.

The image of a higher education organization encompasses a multifaceted perspective, encapsulating the processes, implementation, and perceptions associated with the institution among its stakeholders. Alessandri et al. (2006) proposed a comprehensive understanding of university image, highlighting its dynamic nature and the various dimensions through which it is perceived and experienced. By considering university image as a composite construct shaped by internal practices, external interactions, and public perceptions, Alessandri et al. (2006) underscored the complexity of managing and nurturing a positive institutional image. This conceptualization emphasizes the importance of aligning organizational strategies, communication efforts, and stakeholder engagement initiatives to cultivate a favorable image in the eyes of students, faculty, alumni, employers, and the broader community. Moreover, the proposition put forth by Alessandri et al. (2006) implies that university image extends beyond mere branding or marketing endeavors. It encompasses the lived experiences, interactions, and outcomes associated with the educational institution, reflecting its values, culture, and impact on individuals and society at large. In line with this perspective, assessing and managing university image requires a holistic approach that considers both tangible and intangible aspects of the institution's identity and reputation. By attending to factors such as academic excellence, research contributions, student support services, campus culture, and community engagement, higher education organizations can actively shape their image and enhance their standing in the eyes of stakeholders. In the context of university image, it is essential to distinguish between the self-perception of the institution and the external perceptions held by stakeholders. The concept of self pertains to the institution's internal understanding and management of its identity, while image reflects how the institution is perceived by external observers. As such, the notion of a university's image encompasses the collective assessments and impressions formed by various stakeholders based on their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences over time. University image is shaped by the consistent expression of perceptions and impressions held by stakeholders, including students, faculty, alumni, employers, and the broader community. These perceptions are influenced by factors such as institutional reputation, academic programs, research output, campus facilities, student life, and interactions with faculty and staff. It is important to recognize that university image may vary among different individuals and groups due to differences in their knowledge, experiences, and interactions with the institution. Moreover, incomplete or inaccurate information about the university can lead to diverse perceptions and interpretations of its image.

Therefore, university image is dynamic and multifaceted, evolving over time in response to internal and external factors, as well as individual experiences and interactions. Effective management of university image involves aligning organizational values, communication strategies, and stakeholder engagement efforts to shape positive perceptions and enhance the institution's reputation and standing in the eyes of stakeholders. (Dowling G. , 1988). Assessing organizational image is crucial for

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understanding its strengths and weaknesses. University image, as defined by scholars such as Arpan (2003) and Landrum (1998), provides valuable insights into individuals' perceptions and evaluations of the university. Arpan et al. (2003) identified three factors that influence university image: academic components, athletic elements, and the extent of media coverage of the university.

A positive university image, akin to a favorable brand image in marketing, fosters consumer loyalty and repeat purchases. Research by Dick and Basu (1994) has shown that a good image contributes to enhancing consumer loyalty and facilitates the recollection of positive experiences with the product or service offered. Just as consumers are more likely to repurchase products from brands with a positive image, stakeholders, including students, faculty, alumni, and the general public, are more inclined to engage with and support universities with a favorable image. Therefore, universities must carefully manage their image through strategic communication, branding efforts, and consistent delivery of high-quality academic and extracurricular experiences. By understanding the factors that contribute to university image and actively managing them, institutions can strengthen their reputation, attract talented students and faculty, foster alumni engagement, and ultimately enhance their competitiveness in the higher education landscape.

This research aims to investigate the influence of service quality (SQ) and university image (UI) on word of mouth (WOM). Arndt (1967), recognized as one of the pioneering researchers in the study of word of mouth (WOM) and its impact on consumer behavior, defined WOM as interpersonal communication between a sender and receiver, perceived by the receiver as non-commercial, concerning a brand, product, or service. WOM reflects the consumer's willingness to recommend the product or service to others in the future (Dabholkar et al., 1995). Understanding the dynamics of word of mouth is crucial for organizations, including universities, as positive WOM can significantly influence consumer perceptions, preferences, and ultimately, their decisions. Therefore, by examining the factors that drive word of mouth, such as service quality and university image, this research seeks to provide valuable insights for university administrators and marketers to enhance their reputation, attract prospective students, and engage effectively with stakeholders. Word of mouth (WOM) plays a pivotal role in consumer decision-making, particularly in navigating complex situations and assessing risks (File, 1994). WOM refers to verbal communications, whether positive or negative, exchanged between individuals such as friends, family members, independent experts, and other consumers, with the aim of sharing opinions or experiences about a product, service, or brand (Ennew, 2000). This form of communication is highly influential as it is perceived as more authentic and trustworthy compared to traditional marketing messages. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of WOM is crucial for organizations seeking to manage their reputation and influence consumer perceptions effectively.

Word of mouth (WOM) advertising activities hold immense significance, especially for institutions operating in service industries. Unlike consumer goods, the needs and desires of organizations are often less straightforward and certain. Individuals' perceptions of service quality and benefits can be influenced by various factors, including their social environment, past experiences, and social values. Consequently, people tend to be more influenced by recommendations and opinions from their immediate social circles, who share similar living conditions and social values (Ateşoğlu et al., 2011). This underscores the importance of WOM in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors towards service providers, highlighting the need for organizations to actively manage and leverage WOM as a marketing tool. Word of mouth (WOM) has often been cited as the most effective form of communication in influencing consumers' behavior. It plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' perspectives and purchasing decisions (Yang et al., 2012). A study conducted in the US revealed that a dissatisfied consumer is likely to share their dissatisfaction with nine other individuals, whereas a satisfied or delighted consumer is inclined to share their positive experience with five other individuals (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). This underscores the significant impact that WOM can have on consumer perceptions and brand reputation. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that word of mouth (WOM) has a lasting influence on others, both in the short and long term (Mangold et al., 1999). This underscores the importance of ensuring positive customer experiences and satisfaction, as they can

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lead to favorable WOM recommendations, ultimately contributing to the reputation and success of a business or brand. Word of mouth (WOM) plays a crucial role in the decision-making process, occurring between both known and unknown influencers and decision-makers (Argan, 2012). It serves as a powerful and cost-effective form of advertising for businesses, yet its impact, whether positive or negative, can be significant and difficult to alter once established (Hasan et al., 2012). Therefore, managing WOM effectively is essential for businesses to maintain a positive reputation and influence consumer behavior in their favor.

3. METHODS

The structural model utilized in this research examines three hypotheses, focusing on the impact of service quality (SQ) and university image (UI) on word of mouth (WOM). The survey scales used in this study are adapted from previous research. The service quality scale comprises twelve indicators, with three adapted from Duarte et al. (2012) and the remaining nine from Teddy Chandra et al. (2014). Similarly, the word of mouth scale consists of six indicators adapted from Smith & Ennew (2001). All constructs are measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=7. The study's population includes students enrolled in public and private universities in Pakistan. Primary data collection is conducted through quota sampling techniques, with an online survey questionnaire created using Google Forms and shared in official university groups. The sample comprises 356 students, selected based on valid questionnaires, representing 57 universities, including undergraduate and postgraduate colleges, with 33 public sector universities and 20 private sector universities. The sample encompasses 32 majors from diverse fields of study, ensuring representation across various disciplines. The education system in Pakistan includes diploma, bachelor's, graduate, and postgraduate levels of degrees, with diploma programs taking 2 years, undergraduate degrees 4 years, and postgraduate degrees 2 years for completion. The general age range for undergraduate students is between 18 to 21, while for postgraduate students, it is between 22-24.

Demographic information collected includes gender, age, university name, university type, department name, occupation, education, and socio-economic status, providing comprehensive insights into the characteristics of the sample population. The gender distribution reveals a dominance of male respondents at 66.8%, while females represent 33.2%. This gender imbalance may reflect the broader enrollment patterns in some regional higher education systems, particularly in disciplines where male participation is more prominent. Previous research has shown that gender differences can influence perceptions of service quality and institutional image, with females often exhibiting higher expectations of service responsiveness and interpersonal aspects of service delivery (Joseph & Joseph, 1997). In terms of age, the majority of respondents (48.7%) fall within the 21–24 age group, followed by 29.3% aged 18–20. This suggests that most participants are either in the middle or toward the end of their undergraduate studies. A smaller proportion (13.8%) are between 25–30, and only 3.5% are above 30, indicating limited representation from mature or returning students. Age may influence perceptions of university services, with older students generally demonstrating more critical evaluations due to greater life experience and possibly prior exposure to different academic institutions (Carter & Yeo, 2016).

Regarding university type, the sample is nearly evenly split, with 53.7% from public universities and 46.3% from private universities. This balanced distribution enables meaningful comparison between the two sectors, which is essential for exploring how institutional characteristics may shape service quality perceptions and word-of-mouth behaviors. Studies have shown that students from private universities often have higher expectations due to the cost of tuition and tend to be more responsive to perceived value (Tan & Kek, 2004). The occupational status shows that the majority of respondents (69.1%) are full-time students, while 30.9% are both studying and working. The inclusion of working students is important because employment status has been linked to different service expectations, time constraints, and levels of institutional engagement (Ting, 2000). In terms of educational attainment, 59.8% are undergraduates, 36.7% are pursuing postgraduate studies, and 3.5% are above

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postgraduate level. This composition indicates that while the majority are in earlier academic stages, there is a significant postgraduate presence that may contribute more informed and experience-based assessments of service quality and university image (Oldfield & Baron, 2000).

Socioeconomic status is heavily skewed toward the middle class, which accounts for 87.5% of respondents, followed by 8.0% in the upper class and 4.5% in the lower class. Socioeconomic background can shape access to educational resources, expectations of institutional services, and the likelihood of engaging in word-of-mouth behavior based on perceived service equity and satisfaction (Thomas, 2005). The predominance of middle-class respondents mirrors trends in higher education access where expanding middle-income populations are the most frequent consumers of both public and private university offerings. In sum, Table 1 provides a diverse yet representative overview of the student population surveyed. The demographic spread offers a solid foundation for comparing perceptions of service quality and institutional image across university types and for analyzing how these perceptions translate into word-of-mouth communication—a key driver of reputation and enrollment trends in higher education (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	251	66.8
	Female	125	33.2
Age	18–20	110	29.3
	21–24	183	48.7
	25–30	52	13.8
	Above 30	13	3.5
	University Type	Public University	202
	Private University	174	46.3
Occupation	Student	260	69.1
	Student and Work	116	30.9
Education	Undergraduate	225	59.8
	Postgraduate	138	36.7
	Above Postgraduate	13	3.5
Socioeconomic Status	Upper Class	30	8.0
	Middle Class	329	87.5
	Lower Class	17	4.5

The minimum threshold for the reliability test is set at 0.60. If the reliability of the scale falls below this threshold, the scale is deemed unsuitable for measuring that particular item (Hair et al., 1998). Upon examining the values of the indicators of service quality, university image, and word of mouth, it is evident that the measuring scales are reliable for this study. The Cronbach's alpha (α) value for service quality is calculated to be 0.84, indicating that the items used are 84% reliable in measuring this construct. Similarly, the Cronbach's alpha values for university image and word of mouth are 0.827 and 0.869, respectively, suggesting that these scale items measure 82% and 86% of their respective constructs. Since the Cronbach's alpha values are within the established limit, further analysis can proceed.

Convergent validity of the scales is assessed using Average Variance Extraction (AVE) testing, with a threshold set above 0.5 (Hair et al., 1998). The values of all constructs exceed 0.5, indicating that all measuring constructs are suitable for this study. Furthermore, the positive correlation of all items suggests a positive relationship and parallel movement among them. Factor loadings of items are also

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indicative of reliability, with all values falling within acceptable limits. Additionally, the significance of all items is less than 0.001. Construct Reliability (CR) value, used to check the core consistency of the measuring scale, should be above 0.7 for acceptance. The obtained values for all constructs exceed 0.7, with some reaching as high as 0.9, indicating high consistency (Hair et al., 1998). There are three specific items related to service quality received poor responses. Firstly, it is recommended that teachers ensure equitable treatment of all students to enhance overall satisfaction with the service quality provided. Secondly, administrative staff should offer assistance to students with tasks to promote a sense of comfort and facilitate task completion. Thirdly, the inadequacy of counseling services provided to students is evident, with some universities lacking such services altogether. Thus, it is imperative to enhance counseling services or introduce them where absent.

In terms of word of mouth, one item pertaining to "non-academic provision at the University" received a poor response, indicating student dissatisfaction with non-academic activities. Therefore, it is essential to improve non-academic provisions to generate positive word of mouth among students. Based on the findings, it is recommended that targeted actions be taken for scholars within the 18-20 age group, as they exhibit lower satisfaction levels with university service quality. Additionally, improvements in service quality are particularly warranted within the public university sector. Furthermore, attention should be directed towards enhancing service provision for postgraduate level students. The study suggests that service quality plays a crucial role in generating positive word of mouth. Private universities, in particular, exhibit lower levels of positive word of mouth compared to public universities, indicating a need for improvement in service quality within private institutions. A positive university image is also found to have a significant impact on word of mouth, implying that a favorable image in both domestic and international contexts can lead to positive word of mouth. Factors contributing to a university's image include its ranking, reputation in academic and non-academic spheres, and the overall conducive environment it offers for students.

Given the intense competition between private and public universities, institutions in Pakistan must prioritize improving their service quality to project a positive image and garner favorable word of mouth. It's not just domestic competition they face, but also competition from international universities. Therefore, immediate improvements in service quality are imperative, considering that universities with superior service quality are likely to attract a larger student enrollment.

This study is expected to benefit operational administration, particularly in the service sector, by enhancing the quality of education in higher education institutes. It aligns with Deming's chain response concept theory, which posits that providing higher quality services to stakeholders leads to sustained profits and competitive advantage for the institution. Additionally, it contributes to Sallis's notion of continuous improvement in service quality for effective quality management, ensuring customer satisfaction in both the present and the future. Practically, the study suggests ways in which lectures and administrative staff can improve the quality and image of their university to attract more students. Collaboration with foreign institutes in academic and non-academic activities is also recommended to gain a competitive edge and access modern-day student needs and trends. Ultimately, the study underscores that institutes providing superior service quality will cultivate a positive image and attract a greater number of students through positive word of mouth, leading to long-term profitability.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the data analysis provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the higher education sector, particularly regarding the interplay between service quality, university image, and word of mouth. The significant and positive impact of service quality on university image suggests that institutions that prioritize and excel in delivering high-quality services are more likely to enhance their overall image among stakeholders. This emphasizes the importance of investing in service improvement initiatives to bolster the reputation and perception of universities. Moreover, the observed significant and positive influence of service quality on word of mouth highlights the role of positive experiences and perceptions in driving favorable recommendations and referrals. When

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students, faculty, and staff perceive that their university delivers exceptional services, they are more inclined to share their positive experiences with others, contributing to a positive word-of-mouth marketing effect. This underscores the importance of consistently delivering superior service experiences to cultivate a supportive and engaged community within the university ecosystem. Similarly, the significant and positive influence of university image on word of mouth underscores the importance of reputation and perception in shaping individuals' willingness to advocate for the institution. A strong and positive university image can serve as a catalyst for generating word of mouth, as stakeholders are more likely to endorse and promote an institution they perceive favorably. Therefore, universities must actively manage and cultivate their image through strategic branding, communication, and reputation-building efforts to foster a conducive environment for positive word of mouth.

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of service quality and university image in shaping word of mouth within higher education institutions. As such, it is imperative for universities to prioritize efforts aimed at enhancing service quality, as this not only contributes to the overall perception of the institution but also influences individuals' likelihood to recommend the university to others through positive word of mouth. By investing in initiatives aimed at improving service delivery, universities can effectively bolster their image and cultivate a culture of advocacy among stakeholders. Furthermore, future research endeavors could build upon these findings by exploring similar dynamics within the context of private higher education institutions. Given the unique operating environments and stakeholder expectations associated with private institutions, investigating the impact of service quality and university image on word of mouth within this context could provide valuable insights for both academia and industry practitioners. By conducting comparative analyses between public and private institutions, researchers can uncover nuanced differences and similarities in the factors influencing word of mouth, thus informing targeted strategies for enhancing reputation and fostering positive advocacy within the higher education landscape. In addition, future studies may also delve deeper into the mechanisms through which service quality and university image interact to influence word of mouth. By employing qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, researchers can gain a richer understanding of the underlying motivations and perceptions driving individuals' word-of-mouth behavior within the higher education sector. Such insights can inform the development of tailored interventions and strategies aimed at maximizing the positive impact of service quality and university image on word of mouth, ultimately contributing to the overall success and competitiveness of higher education institutions in an increasingly complex and dynamic landscape.

Indeed, extending this line of inquiry to other sectors, particularly in the context of emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, holds significant promise for advancing our understanding of the interplay between service quality, organizational image, and word of mouth. The unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic have necessitated rapid adaptations and transformations across various industries, fundamentally altering consumer expectations and behaviors. Incorporating variables related to the COVID-19 impact, such as changes in service delivery methods, health and safety protocols, and organizational responses to crisis management, can offer valuable insights into how these factors influence perceptions of service quality, organizational image, and subsequent word-of-mouth behavior. For example, examining how universities have adapted their teaching modalities, student support services, and campus safety measures in response to the pandemic can shed light on the effectiveness of these initiatives in shaping stakeholders' perceptions and advocacy. Furthermore, exploring the differential impact of the pandemic on service quality and organizational image across various sectors, such as healthcare, hospitality, retail, and finance, can provide a comprehensive understanding of the broader implications of crisis management on consumer perceptions and behaviors. By identifying sector-specific challenges and opportunities arising from emergency situations like COVID-19, organizations can develop tailored strategies to enhance service quality, bolster organizational image, and foster positive word of mouth. Overall, expanding the scope of research to encompass emergency

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situations and their effects on service quality, organizational image, and word of mouth presents an exciting avenue for future inquiry. By leveraging real-world challenges as a catalyst for knowledge generation and practical application, researchers can contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies for navigating crises and sustaining organizational success in an increasingly volatile and uncertain environment.

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