

Influence of perceived service quality on word-of-mouth: The mediating role of brand trust and student satisfaction

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Abstract:

Purpose: The primary purpose of this research is to examine the influence of perceived service quality (PSQ) on word-of-mouth (WOM) directly and through the mediating role of brand trust (BTR) and student satisfaction (SAT) at private universities located in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).

Design/Methodology/approach: A structured questionnaire and convenience sampling was utilized to collect data from 350 students enrolled in selected private universities in the TRNC. Data analysis was conducted using Smart-PLS 4.

Findings: This study found that PSQ has a significant influence on WOM. BTR and SAT have a direct and significant effect on WOM. We also found that BTR and SAT mediate the link between PSQ and WOM.

Practical implication: These findings can serve as a guide for university administration to enhance the quality of services offered to students, as well as to enhance existing policies and procedures.

Originality/value: This paper's originality lies in the use of Cognitive – affective behavior (CAB) to support the relationship between student perceptions of service quality, brand trust, student satisfaction, and word-of-mouth.

Keywords: Brand trust, Cognitive-affective behavior, Higher education, Service quality,

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

The intense competitive landscape has prompted the HE to develop new strategies aimed at gaining a competitive edge and effectively implementing these strategies to meet the needs of students (Bui et al., 2023). Service quality is essential to attract students to higher learning institutions, fostering effective engagement, career growth, and an encouraging educational setting. Understanding these demands is crucial for designing and delivering a higher education service that satisfies student needs (Lee & Seong et al., 2020). According to Bui et al. (2023), quality and improved management procedures are a few of the key areas on which universities are presently focusing in order to attract students.

Furthermore, the United Nations has formulated the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (UN SDGs) for global implementation. By 2030, the UNSDG 4 aims to achieve universal access to inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals (Kozhimala & Devasia, 2023). The outcome of UNSDGs may include impoverishment and marginalization for a total of 750 million individuals (Park et al., 2023). UNESCO creates educational materials to support individuals in leading a global lifestyle devoid of intolerance and prejudice (Karatekin & Uzunöz, 2022). The objective is to guarantee universal access to quality education for all children and citizens while promoting national cohesion and equitable treatment (Addey, 2021).

The research field has yielded varying results regarding perceived service quality in higher education. While some studies have found that perceived service quality significantly influences WOM (Putu & Ekawati, 2020; Manzoor et al., 2022), others have found insignificant results (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022). Researchers have found that satisfaction mediates the relationship between PSQ and WOM (Radiah et al., 2021; Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022; Tani et al., 2021), while others have found that brand trust mediates the association between PSQ and WOM (Chiou & Droge, 2006; Zehir et al., 2011). To the best of the authors' knowledge, there are few studies that use brand trust and satisfaction as potential mediators in existing relationships. However, there has been limited attention to the combined mediating effect of BTR and SAT on the relationship between PSQ and WOM in higher education. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to examine the influence of perceived service quality on word-of-mouth and also the mediating role of brand trust, and satisfaction in the context of higher education.

According to Watson et al. (2015), the process of establishing client loyalty and generating profits from new consumers can be time-consuming. Additionally, the expenses associated with replacing customers are quite high. The findings will improve existing research on the relationship between perception of service quality as well as the assessment and interconnectedness of SAT, WOM, and BTR. The outcomes will have significant consequences for all stakeholders in the private university sector that are involved in providing education and achieving UNSDGs. The research gains additional importance due to its interdisciplinary nature, encompassing marketing, management, and education.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Cognitive- Affective -Behavioural (CAB)

The CAB paradigm is used to study the relationship between cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics (Mustaffa et al., 2020). The CAB paradigm explains the causal evaluation of components such as cognitive (PSQ), emotional (SAT), and behavioural (WOM). Indeed, the service quality-satisfaction-behavioural intentions model has become one of the most widely used research models for discussing the impact of perceived service quality on word-of-mouth (Ledden et al., 2011). Previous research has shown that the causal sequence between cognitive (PSQ), affective (SAT), and behavioural (WOM) components has been experimentally demonstrated (Sultan & Wong, 2012). The concept posits that we interpret and react to various circumstances, not a single characteristic, that dictates our actions. According to this paradigm, people have a variety of enduring personality traits that are dependent on various external factors, such as beliefs, ambitions, values, and emotions. The research model is presented in Figure 1.

Perceived Service Quality (PSQ)

It was observed that, certain factors influence students' PSQ and decision to choose HE, including the information they receive about the brand, trust in HE, processes, and people (El Alfy & Abukari, 2020). According to Brochado (2009), SERVPERF and HEdPERF are more reliable indicators of PSQ in higher education than SERVQUAL. Abdullah (2006) presented the HEdPERF model as an example of a research survey that aimed to apply or adapt the SERVQUAL instrument for the higher education service quality measurement scale. The favourable influence of PSQ on BTR has also been demonstrated by prior empirical studies (Maeriyana et al., 2019). Furthermore,

when a consumer tells other potential customers about their unique interactions with the business, word-of-mouth marketing occurs (Brzozowska-Wo, 2018). The study by Farzin and Fattahi (2018) revealed that the effectiveness of WOM depends on the quality of interaction between the provider of the service and the receiver. Stribbell & Duangekanong (2022) confirmed the causal link between behavioural intentions and perceived service quality. Suyanto et al. (2019) established a strong association between SAT and PSQ at private colleges. Based on this theoretical framework, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: PSQ has a positive and significant influence on BTR.

H2: PSQ has a positive and significant influence on WOM.

H3: PSQ has a positive and significant influence on SAT.

Brand Trust (BTR)

According to Saputra et al. (2019), there is a correlation between brand trust and satisfaction: the more parents or students trust the school, the more satisfied they will be with it. Diputra and Yasa's (2021) study demonstrated a significant and positive relationship between brand trust and satisfaction. Private universities that can improve their brand credibility have a great opportunity to raise student satisfaction (Dayanti et al., 2019); this indicated that brand trust has a significant influence on WOM. According to Oraedu's (2020) research, students are more likely to recommend a school to relatives and friends if they have a high level of BTR. Given this theoretical framework, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

H4: BTR has a positive and significant influence on SAT.

H5: BTR has a positive and significant influence on WOM.

The Relationship between SAT and WOM

According to Sijoria et al. (2018), satisfied students are more likely to talk about the school and promote it to their friends and relatives. Higher education has labelled students as its consumers. Considering students as customers has led to the perception of the educational as an economic product, compelling them to consistently seek value for their investment and operate as economic entities driven by specific needs (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Rasheed & Rashid, 2023). Hence, institutions of higher education must satisfy the needs of their customers. Subrahmanyam and Shekhar (2017) assert a direct relationship between student loyalty and satisfaction.

Additionally, there was a significant association between loyalty and student positive behavioural intentions as well as satisfaction (Chandra et al., 2019). As a result, satisfied students will stick around the university and spread the word about the HEs to others. Using this theoretical framework, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H6: SAT has a positive and significant influence on WOM.

Brand Trust and Student Satisfaction as a Mediating Variables

According to the direct relationship above, BTR has a significant mediating effect between PSQ and WOM (Ahmad & Ali et al., 2022). Our research has identified a gap in higher education where BTR is not being utilised as a mediator between PSQ and WOM. Hence, the main objective of this research is to bridge the existing void and contribute valuable insights to the body of knowledge in the domain of higher education, particularly focusing on private colleges. Moreover, the study of Stribbell and Duangekanong (2022) indicated that satisfaction plays a mediation role between PSQ and WOM. Another study by Mahadin and Akroush (2019) found that SAT partially mediates the link between PSQ and WOM. Based on the literature review, we constructed the following hypotheses:

H7: BTR has a mediation role between PSQ and WOM.

H8: SAT has a mediation role between PSQ and WOM.

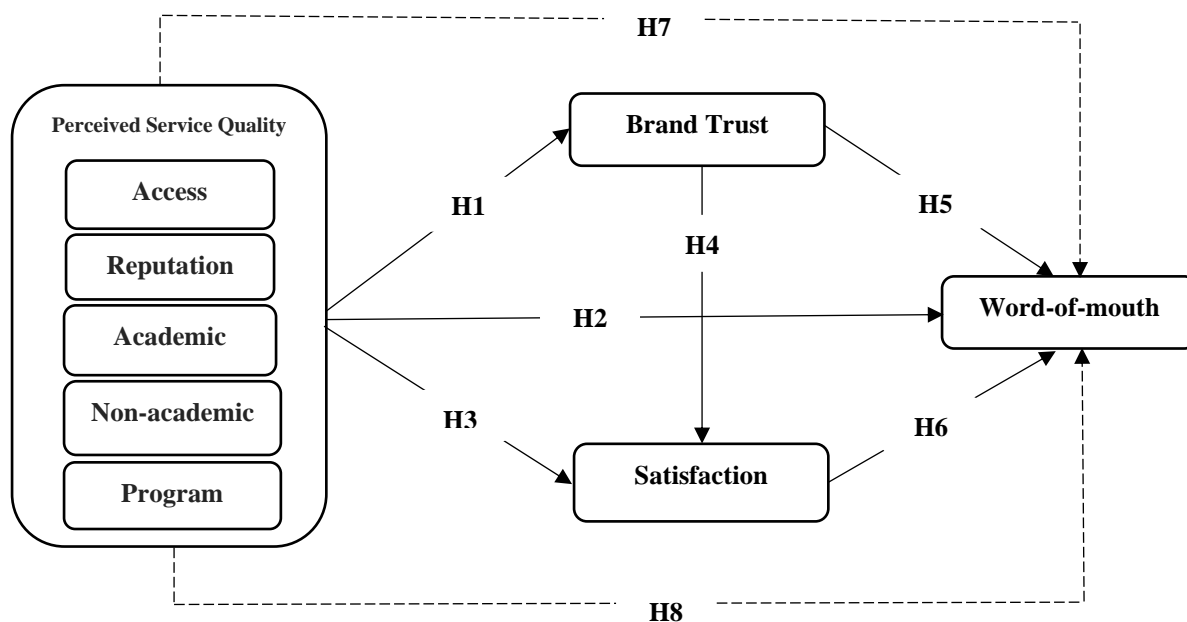


Figure 1: Research Model

Source(s): Authors' work, 2024

Methodology

Study Procedure and Sample

A cross-sectional study was conducted. This study focused on active students from private universities in Lefkosia, the TRNC's capital city. The convenience sampling approach employs structured questionnaires to obtain data after informed consent. Forza & Filippini (1998) recommend that a satisfactory sample size should consist of a minimum of 100 observations, while a range of 50 to 400 observations is also considered acceptable. Therefore, we distributed 384 questionnaires for an unknown population, following Cochran's (1977) suggestions. For this research, we utilized 350 usable questionnaires with an informed consent form, resulting in a 91% response rate. Thus, the study's sample size ($n = 350$) is sufficient for utilizing Smart-PLS.

Measurement

Student satisfaction was measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly dissatisfied) to 5 (strongly satisfied). We used five items to measure satisfaction formerly used by Ali et al. (2016). The 31 perceived service quality items were divided into 5 dimensions: academic (9 items), non-academic (10 items), program issues (4 items), reputation (4 items), and access (4 items). We adapted these from Ali et al. (2016). According to Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021), four items of brand trust were adapted. Five items from word-of-mouth were adapted from Meštrović & Zugic (2018) and Ahmedi et al. (2019).

Data Analysis and Results

Measurement Model Assessment

The PLS-SEM algorithm method was applied to analyse the reliability and validity of the research model (see Table I). We used the outer loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) to check

for convergent validity, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) to check for multicollinearity. We assessed the internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha, and composite reliability (CR). The outer loadings are above the threshold of 0.60 (Jordan & Spiess 2019), the VIF value is less than the threshold value of 5, Cronbach's alpha is above 0.70, and AVE values surpass the threshold of 0.50, thereby establishing reliability and validity as recommended by Hair et al. (2021).

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Loadings (λ)	CA	CR	AVE	VIF
<i>Perceived service quality (PSQ)</i>					
Academic aspects	AAS	0.918	0.920	0.635	
AAS1: "Instructors are knowledgeable for answering my questions regarding course content."	0.754				2.061
AAS2: "Instructors deal in a courteous manner"	0.774				2.090
AAS3: "When I have a problem, instructors show a sincere interest in solving it"	0.828				2.441
AAS4: "Instructors have positive and high expectations for students."	0.855				2.865
AAS5: "Instructors communicate positively in the classroom."	0.801				2.602
AAS6: "Instructors provide feedback about my progress."	0.768				2.092
AAS7: "Instructors are highly qualified and experienced in their respective field of specialization."	0.795				2.594
AAS9: "The documentations are provided adequately by the instructors."	0.792				2.704
<i>Non-Academic aspects</i>					
NAS1: "When I have a problem, the university's administrative staff is keen to solve it."	NAS 0.852	0.933	0.936	0.652	2.913
NAS2: "The university's administrative staff provides individual attention to my inquiries."	0.731				1.850
NAS3: "Questions and complaints are dealt with quickly and effectively."	0.768				2.077
NAS5: "When the administrative staff promises to do something within a certain time, they do it."	0.833				3.718
NAS6: "The administrative staff has a positive attitude towards their work and the students."	0.806				2.302
NAS7: "The administrative staff communicates well with the students."	0.854				3.146
NAS8: "The administrative staff is knowledgeable of the university's systems and/or procedures."	0.806				2.327
NAS9: "Students are treated equally by the staffs."	0.778				2.152
NAS10: "The staffs respect the terms of confidentiality when I disclose information to them"	0.776				2.109
<i>Reputation</i>					
REP1: "The university has a professional image."	REP 0.840	0.855	0.855	0.697	2.072
REP2: "The academic program run by the university is reputable."	0.846				2.097
REP3: "The university's graduates are easily employable."	0.824				1.888
REP4: "The university has a good image."	0.828				1.914
<i>Access</i>					
ACC1: "Academic staffs are willingness to respond my request for assistance."	ACC 0.864	0.883	0.884	0.741	2.282

ACC2: “Academics staffs allocate sufficient time for consultation”	0.865				2.287
ACC3: “The staffs ensure that they are easily contacted.”	0.849				2.164
ACC4: “Academic staff are knowledgeable to respond my request.”	0.865				2.304
<i>Program Issues</i>	PRO	0.868	0.868	0.717	
PRO1: “The university runs excellent quality programs.”	0.831				1.927
PRO2: “The university offers a wide range of program with various specializations.”	0.839				2.010
PRO3: “The university operates an excellent counselling service.”	0.858				2.267
PRO4: “The university offers programs with flexible structure.”	0.859				2.259
<i>Student Satisfaction</i>	SAT	0.840	0.841	0.676	
SAT1: “I am satisfied with my decision to register at this university.”	0.822				1.856
SAT2: “My choice to choose this university was a wise one.”	0.827				1.928
SAT4: “The academic degree offered by the university is worth the effort.”	0.840				1.981
SAT5: “The academic degree offered by the university is worth the effort.”	0.798				1.702
<i>Brand trust</i>	BTR	0.890	0.901	0.752	
BTR1: “This university can be trusted.”	0.799				2.309
BTR2: “This university is expected to do what is right.”	0.868				2.563
BTR3: “This university has high integrity.”	0.885				2.732
BTR4: “This university keeps its promises.”	0.911				3.502
<i>Word-of-mouth</i>	WOM	0.876	0.882	0.669	
WOM1: “I would speak positively about the benefits gained from studying at this University.”	0.829				2.048
WOM2: “I would speak positively about the academic provision at this University.”	0.847				2.552
WOM3: “I would speak positively about the non-academic provision at this University.”	0.857				2.719
WOM4: “Overall, I would speak positively about this University.”	0.767				2.067
WOM5: “I would recommend this University to my family and friends.”	0.784				2.178

Note: n=350. CA=Cronbach’s Alpha, CR=Composite Reliability, AVE=Average Variance Extracted, VIF=Variance inflation factor

Source(s): Authors’ work, 2024

We establish discriminant validity because the HTMT and Fornell and Larcker criteria values fall within the acceptable range below 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015) (see Table II).

Table 2. Discriminant validity

Fornell-Larcker criterion								Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)								
	AAS	ACC	BTR	NAS	PRO	REP	SAT	WOM	AAS	ACC	BTR	NAS	PRO	REP	SAT	WOM
AAS	0.797															
ACC	0.661	0.861							0.731							
BTR	0.672	0.711	0.867						0.736	0.792						
NAS	0.709	0.758	0.749	0.807					0.759	0.832	0.815					
PRO	0.645	0.627	0.695	0.650	0.847				0.720	0.716	0.786	0.720				
REP	0.724	0.683	0.745	0.729	0.703	0.835			0.816	0.786	0.850	0.816	0.816			
SAT	0.632	0.713	0.766	0.777	0.633	0.747	0.822		0.719	0.828	0.881	0.876	0.741	0.881		
WOM	0.677	0.697	0.800	0.759	0.660	0.763	0.755	0.818	0.747	0.787	0.892	0.835	0.754	0.876	0.873	

Source(s): Authors' work, 2024

Structural Model Assessment

The PLS-SEM algorithm and bootstrapping method were utilised to assess the structural model (see Table III and Figure 2). H1 states that PSQ has a positive and significant influence on BTR ($\beta = 0.825$; $t = 32.22$; $P = 0.000$); therefore, based on the bootstrapping result (see Table III), H1 was supported. H2 proposed that PSQ has a positive and significant influence on WOM ($\beta = 0.415$; $t = 5.255$; $P = 0.000$); therefore, based on the P-value ($P < 0.05$), H2 was supported. H3 states that PSQ has a positive and significant influence on SAT ($\beta = 0.563$; $t = 10.389$; $P = 0.000$); therefore, H3 was supported. H4 proposed that BTR has a positive and significant influence on SAT ($\beta = 0.301$; $t = 5.008$; $P = 0.000$), hence, H4 was supported. H5 proposed that brand trust has a significant and positive influence on WOM ($\beta = 0.331$; $t = 4.555$; $P = 0.000$); therefore, H5 was supported. H6 states that SAT has a positive and significant influence on WOM ($\beta = 0.165$; $t = 2.741$; $P = 0.006$); therefore, H6 was supported. H7 states that BTR mediates the link between PSQ and WOM ($\beta = 0.273$; $t = 4.567$; $P = 0.000$); hence, H7 was supported. H8 proposed that SAT mediates the link between the relationship between PSQ and WOM ($\beta = 0.093$; $t = 2.624$; $P = 0.000$); therefore, H8 was supported.

Table III: Hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses	Path	Coefficient	Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	P-value	Decision
H1	PSQ ->BTR	0.825	0.825	0.026	32.222	0.000	Supported
H2	PSQ ->WOM	0.415	0.419	0.079	5.255	0.000	Supported
H3	PSQ ->SAT	0.563	0.562	0.054	10.389	0.000	Supported
H4	BTR ->SAT	0.301	0.300	0.060	5.008	0.000	Supported
H5	BTR->WOM	0.331	0.327	0.073	4.555	0.000	Supported
H6	SAT ->WOM	0.165	0.166	0.060	2.741	0.006	Supported
Mediation effect							
H7	PSQ -> BTR -> WOM	0.273	0.269	0.060	4.567	0.000	Partial mediation
H8	PSQ ->SAT -> WOM	0.093	0.093	0.035	2.624	0.000	Partial mediation
Total Effect							
	PSQ ->WOM	0.822	0.822	0.024	33.877	0.000	Supported

Note(s): n=350. AAS, academic aspects; ACC, access; BTR, brand trust; non-academic aspects; PRO, program issues; REP, reputation; SAT, satisfaction; WOM; word-of-mouth.

Source(s): Authors' work, 2024

The estimated model's SRMR value is 0.040, which is lower than 0.08, the NIF value (0.958) surpasses the required threshold of 0.9, which indicates a satisfactory model fit (Goretzko et al., 2023). Therefore, we can conclude that the suggested model effectively fits the data.

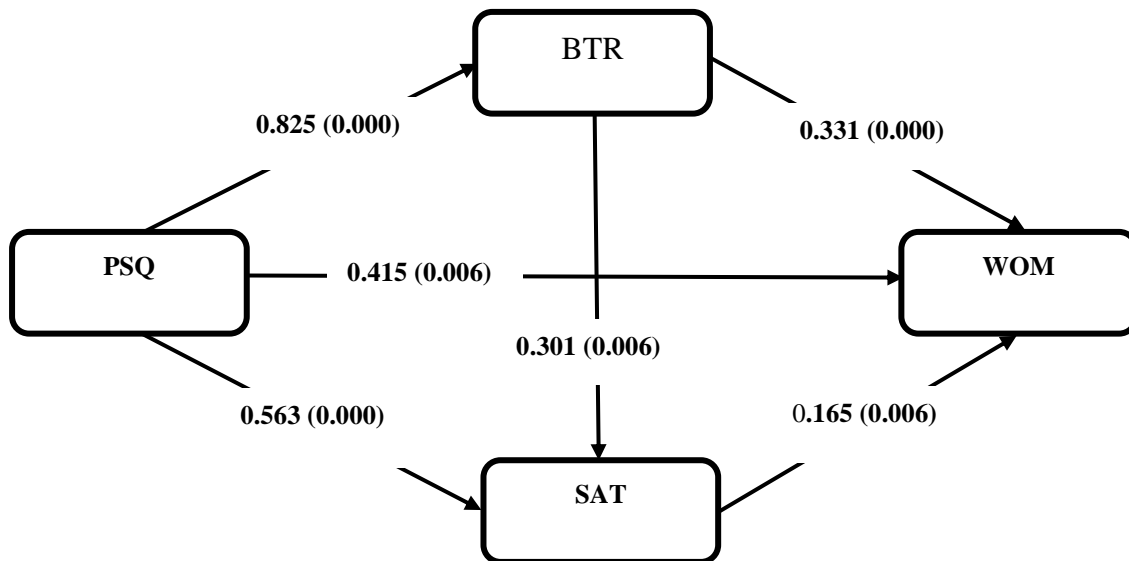


Figure 2: Structural model assessment.

Note: The number outside the bracket indicates standardised coefficients, and the one in the bracket indicates the P-value.

Source(s): Authors' work, 2024

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the direct and indirect effects of PSQ on WOM via BTR and SAT. As a result, the research sought to shed light on the direct impact of PSQ on WOM, as well as the mediating effects of BTR and SAT.

H1 results show that the effect of PSQ on WOM is statistically significant. This is consistent with the findings of prior empirical studies (Maeriyana et al., 2019). When customers are pleased with the calibre of services offered, brand trust will develop (Shoukat et al., 2020). H2 findings show that PSQ significantly influences WOM. The result is consistent with earlier research (Ahmad & Ali et al., 2022); they state that the level of service provided significantly influences positive WOM. H3 finding indicates that PSQ has a significant impact on SAT. The result is consistent with Suyanto et al. (2019), who found that PSQ significantly influences the degree of student SAT.

H4 states that BTR has a positive and significant influence on SAT. The results clearly indicate that BTR has a significant impact on SAT. The results align with the findings of Osman and Saputra (2019), who emphasize that an increase in trust leads to a rise in student satisfaction with the school. H5 states that BTR has a positive and significant influence on WOM. The results show that BTR significantly influences WOM. The result is similar to that of Oraedu (2020); they found that students must have trust in the brand to recommend it to friends and family, while also considering the quality of service and satisfaction.

H6 states that satisfaction has a positive and significant influence on word-of-mouth. The result reveals that SAT has a significant effect on WOM. The result aligns with the findings of Stribbell and Duangekanong (2022), who discovered that strong WOM contributed to student satisfaction and helped retain students at the same university for subsequent academic cycles.

H7 states that BTR mediates the link between PSQ and WOM. The result shows that BTR significantly mediates the relationship between PSQ and WOM. The result is in line with Ahmad & Ali et al. (2022). The H7 was supported. H8 proposed that SAT mediates the relationship between PSQ and WOM. The finding demonstrates that SAT mediates the association between

PSQ and WOM. The result is consistent with Subrahmanyam et al. (2017); they found that if students are satisfied with the service they receive from higher education, it will increase their loyalty to the institution.

This research's main finding is that BTR and SAT has a mediating role in the relationship between perceived PSQ and WOM. Furthermore, the perception of service quality is a critical factor in establishing confidence in higher education (Al-Dweeri et al., 2019; Rasheed & Rashid, 2023). The assessment of higher education quality of service relies heavily on students' perspectives about academic aspects, non-academic aspects, reputation, access, and program issues (Arrieta & Avolio, 2020; Moslehpour et al., 2020). In order to establish trust and foster long-term relationships with their customers, most higher education institutions prioritize the delivery of exceptional services (Shafiee & Bazargan, 2018). In the context of HE, the concept of CAB emphasizes the idea that one's actions are not determined by a single characteristic but rather by the understanding and response to various circumstances in the delivery of service quality. Therefore, when students have a positive perception of service quality and are satisfied with all aspects of service delivery, they develop trust in the institution and spread positive WOM to friends (Rehman et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2022).

Theoretical Implication

This research has enhanced our understanding of the connection between BTR, WOM, SAT, and PSQ in the context of HE. Research on the factors and consequences of service quality in private universities, particularly in TRNC, is scarce. In TRNC. This study supports the education industry by highlighting the impact of brand trust and student satisfaction on the relationship between students' perceptions of service quality and word-of-mouth communication. This study fills a gap in the existing literature by examining how BTR and SAT mediate the relationship between PSQ and WOM in higher education.

Managerial Implication

The results of this research can assist managers in strategic planning and decision-making processes, as well as help the management team of private universities in the TRNC understand the significance of service quality and how it affects SAT, BTR, and WOM. The higher education quality board of Turkey (MÜDEK), which is building a framework for a quality curriculum and a

benchmark for monitoring private universities' service quality, would also benefit from this study. The assurance of private institutions' high-quality services would aid MÚDEK's attempts to market TRNC as a prime international location for higher education. Besides this, managers of private universities should concentrate on improving service quality to enhance BTR and student SAT.

The study's findings provide helpful insights for students and parents, highlighting the significant influence of PSQ on important aspects such as brand trust, word-of-mouth referrals, and satisfaction. These observations underscore the significance of thoroughly assessing the calibre and reliability of an institution when selecting a higher education provider. Through a comprehensive evaluation of these factors, potential students and their families can make better-informed choices, guaranteeing a more favourable calibre and satisfying educational journey. This information will assist regulatory bodies in making the necessary adjustments to the sustainable development goals for education in the future. These findings will aid governing bodies in implementing preventive measures, changing existing regulations, and effectively achieving the goals of SDG 4.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

This research is not without drawbacks. Firstly, we exclusively collected data from private higher education institutions. Thus, the results of this study can only be generalised to private higher education. Public higher education may undergo similar research, leading to results that differ from those of private institutions. Secondly, TRNC, a self-accredited institution, is the location for this research. Therefore, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, we recommend conducting future studies in other geographic areas, particularly in developing countries like Africa. Future studies can consider other potential mediators (e.g., brand image) between PSQ and WOM. Thirdly, this study employed the HEDPERF scale to measure perceived service quality; we recommend future research to employ the SERVQUAL scale.

Conclusion

This study's findings indicate that PSQ plays an important role in increasing student satisfaction, brand trust, and word-of-mouth in private universities located in TRNC. Additionally, the study found that student SAT and BTR mediated the relationship between PSQ and WOM. The research presented here will outline the marketing tactics that universities can use to set themselves apart from rivals and create a long-term competitive advantage. Student satisfaction plays an important

role in spreading positive WOM about the university to relatives, friends, and family. It implies that enhancing service calibre and brand trust will favourably enhance satisfaction, which will increase students' propensity to recommend the institution. Furthermore, this study examines the implications of the sustainable development objectives for improving education, as well as the measures taken to achieve this goal by 2030.

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