



Believe a friend or the University? Students' satisfaction with service personnel and Word-of-Mouth in Tanzanian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The increasing competition among higher education institutions underscores the need to understand how service personnel influence student satisfaction and, consequently, word of mouth. To fill this knowledge gap, this study seeks to comprehend the link between university service quality and student referrals, with the long-term goal of improving student engagement and satisfaction. It determines how University students' satisfaction mediates the nexus between service personnel and word of mouth. This research study adopted a cross-sectional research design. Both stratified and simple random sampling methods were employed to reach a total of 201 respondents. Data were collected using structured questionnaires, and Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM) was used to analyse the relationships in Amos 26. This study finds that the provision of quality service in universities relies on two characteristic features: service personnel and consumers' usage experiences, as expressed through the word of mouth. Specifically, the findings reveal that University students' satisfaction serves as a direct mediator of the relationship between university service personnel and word of mouth. This study offers policy implications and insights into service encounters and word of mouth based on university students' service experiences. Universities should set policies and strategies to help them understand students' expectations and build strong relationships with them. Building strong, beneficial relationships with students and understanding their expectations are crucial for universities to fulfil their commitments and foster satisfaction through effective interactions with service personnel. The contribution of this research study to the body of knowledge lies in its efforts to advance the policies and literature on effective marketing strategies in university education. It makes another innovative contribution to the body of knowledge by linking the expectation disconfirmation theory to the nexus among university service personnel, customer satisfaction, and word-of-mouth in the higher education industry.

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INTRODUCTION

University education worldwide is undergoing a significant era of transformation to rebuild its infrastructure, systems, operational processes, and knowledge transformation methods, aiming to improve the quality of education and overall global economic development (Le et al., 2022; Munyengabe et al., 2017). Following these transformations, global university education has transitioned from a state of disrepair and decline to one of restoration and renewal (Carroll & Ruseski, 2011). For instance, the World Bank reports a significant increase in global student enrollment, from 89 million in 1998 to over 200 million to date (WB, 2018). In Africa, there are over 1,650 Universities across the continent (Jonathan, 2017). In Tanzania, since independence in 1961, University education has evolved from a single university college to 55 registered universities and university colleges, with more than 106,599 registered degree students annually (Tanzania Commission for Universities-TCU, 2025). As we admit this milestone move in university education, studies (i.e., Dandis et al., 2022; Sheng & Fauzi, 2024; Sun et al., 2021; Handayanto, 2018; Mwongoso et al., 2015; Casidy & Wymer, 2015) indicate gaps in terms of the ability of universities to realise the quality-of-service personnel, students' satisfaction, and positive word-of-mouth (WoM). Arguably, these universities face service delivery challenges that limit students' ability to maximise their learning potential and contribute efficiently to the highly skilled national labour force and economic growth (Jonathan, 2017).

The presence of high-calibre service personnel in university education is among the most pressing problems not only in Tanzania but also in almost all developing economies. Excellent service personnel are a central parameter that clearly describes the level of satisfaction of university students (Masserini et al., 2019). The quality-of-service personnel in universities encompass the skills and ability to provide students with personalised attention, understand their needs, treat them with respect, and demonstrate a willingness to help and solve their problems while on campus (Elumalai et al., 2021; Alayoubi et al., 2020). All these are central to the engagement between customers (i.e., university students) and service providers (i.e., lecturers and supporting staff) in the service arena. Quality of service personnel covers all key functional areas of student activities in the University, including admission, registration, classroom interactions, assessments, and certification.

Universities face numerous challenges that negatively affect their academic excellence and overall performance (France & Hawa, 2020). One serious obstacle to the development of universities in a competitive environment is the need to achieve positive WoM among university students and graduates. Competition in the education sector has changed the way universities operate and their focus, shifting from providing quality education to offering services that motivate customers to spread positive WoM and promote their brand image (Muya & Tundui, 2020). Previous studies (i.e., Kazungu and Kubenea, 2023; Mukerjee, 2018; Mohtasham et al., 2017; Basri et al., 2016) define WoM as non-formal communication amongst customers about a business's products or services. This study adopted the definition by Goyette *et al.* (2010), who classified WoM into four sub-groups: (i) WoM content, (ii) WoM intensity, (iii) Negative word-of-mouth (nWoM), and (iv) Positive word-of-mouth (pWoM). The WoM intensity focuses on what customers say about a business, while WoM content refers to the content of the business that customers say. The pWoM and nWoM refer to customers' positive and negative attitudes towards an organisation (Goyette et al., 2010). Thus, a dissatisfied consumer is expected to experience negative feelings, frustrations, and anxiety over nWoM compared to those with pWoM (Li *et al.*, 2020). In this study, we use WoM as oral communication among university students about the services they receive, in which they discuss the services (i.e., good or bad) and any content they may have for potential students.

The vital role of service personnel in the service encounter process is crucial as it directly impacts customer satisfaction regarding the quality of service provided, leading to favourable WoM (Huang et al., 2024; Hsu, 2018; Handayanto, 2018; Mukerjee, 2018; Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Sivadas & Jindal, 2017). The dynamic interaction between service personnel and customers during the delivery of exceptional service experiences has become a focal point for researchers in marketing and management disciplines (Hsu, 2018). There is unanimous agreement on the importance of customer satisfaction in the service sector. It is an intangible asset vital for the sustainability and competitive edge of a service firm (Ngo & Nguyen, 2016). Consequently, satisfied customers significantly enhance WoM intentions (Hsu, 2018). Therefore, universities should invest in customer satisfaction and high-quality service facilities to attract a larger student base. This is essential for influencing choices regarding course selections, study programs, and university decisions (Pamela et al., 2017).

Firms face challenges of serving and maintaining strong relations with the King (the customer) (Yeni & Yasri, 2018). The collaborative bond formed between service personnel and customers during a service encounter promotes long-term, positive relationships (de Oliveira, 2025; Juliana et al., 2024). Consequently, service organisations must emphasise the importance of service management and develop improved service encounter strategies to encourage customers to engage in WoM (Hsu, 2018). According to Huang et al (2024) and Voorhees (2017), service encounters are distinct interactions between customers and service providers regarding a core service offering. Service firms hold a similar interest in service encounters as customers and employees, as satisfactory interactions can provide service firms with a competitive advantage, leading to repeat usage, positive WoM, and enhanced customer satisfaction (Meesala, 2018), garnering scholars' attention in recent years within marketing and management literature (Hsu, 2018).

Service facilities also help organisations preserve their reputations and enhance customer satisfaction. Thus, universities must foster a positive relationship between service staff and customer satisfaction, leading to long-term customer relationships that consistently share favourable WoM (Farooq et al., 2018). This is because the actions of service personnel during service delivery can strongly influence a customer's perception of the organisation, regardless of their overall satisfaction. According to Ishamuddin et al. (2019), the way service staff interact with customers significantly affects customer feedback beyond mere satisfaction; a single negative interaction from a single staff member can mar a customer's experience, even if other staff members treat them well. Consequently, this context highlights that service delivery in universities has acquired significant attention from researchers; similarly, this study examines the influence of service personnel and customer satisfaction on WoM. It further explores the role of customer satisfaction as a mediator in the relationship between service personnel and WoM communication. The significance of this study lies in its ability to stimulate meaningful policy reforms in Tanzanian higher education. By focusing on students' satisfaction with service staff as a mediating variable in word-of-mouth, the research offers important suggestions for universities seeking to enhance service quality. The suggestions challenge policymakers to focus on facilitating positive interactions between universities and students, so that students' expectations are understood and addressed. By focusing on providing high-quality services and personalised care, universities can increase student satisfaction and encourage positive word of mouth. Ultimately, this study lends validity to the development of effective marketing strategies that enhance the overall education experience and make a significant contribution to higher education development and growth in Tanzania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

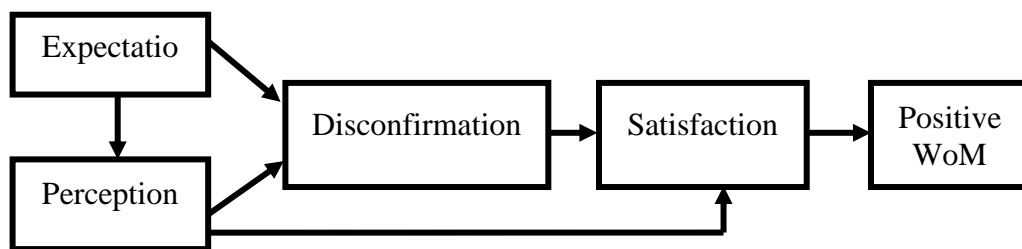
Theoretical review

This study is anchored on the Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT). This is one of the vibrant theories of expectations. Over the years, the EDT has been widely used by marketing researchers (e.g., Oliver, 1977; Oliver, 1980; Isac & Rusu, 2014; Carraher-Wolverton, 2022; Rathjens et al., 2023), as well as education researchers like Sheng and Fauzi (2024), Wolverton and Zhu (2021), and Schwarz and Zhu (2015). The EDT defines a process by which an individual customer compares their pre-usage expectations with post-usage perceptions of a particular service/product to determine the degree to which expectations are met, and uses this information to assess their level of dissatisfaction or satisfaction (Wolverton et al., 2020; Bhattacharjee, 2001).

Throughout the EDT process, a customer evaluates their post-usage beliefs about a product or service's performance, which contrast with their pre-usage expectations of how the service or product should perform (Cadotte et al., 1987). The resulting product or service performance can be described as better, equal, or poorer than the expected performance (Oliver, 1980). If the service or product performance meets expectations, the outcome is called "confirmation." Nevertheless, "disconfirmation" occurs when service or product performance is better or worse than expected. Thus, Hsu et al. (2006) found that confirming expectations directly predicts customer satisfaction. The key to knowing customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction lies in one's ability to learn from past experiences (Isac & Rusu, 2014). According to the EDT, customer dissatisfaction is determined by the disconfirmation of previously used services or products, as well as by his/her expectations for the disruptive service or product (Fan & Suh, 2014). (See figure 1).

This study uses the EDT to assess customer satisfaction and its mediating role in service personnel-WoM relationships. According to Oliver's (1997) Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), customer satisfaction results from comparing customers' expectations with actual perceptions. The extent to which these expectations are subsequently disconfirmed influences satisfaction levels (see Figure 1). Thus, from the service industry's perspective, customer satisfaction signifies a comprehensive assessment of the service experience (Li et al., 2013). In this study, if the service provision meets or exceeds expectations, customers (i.e, university students) are typically satisfied. Nevertheless, if the service fails to meet customers' expectations, they are typically dissatisfied with the University's service. Therefore, we propose the use of EDT in higher education, as it offers valuable insights into students' satisfaction levels, their intention to continue using University services, and their positive WoM intentions.

Figure 1: Expectancy disconfirmation framework



Source: Adopted and modified from Oliver (1997)

Hypothesis Development

Service personnel and customer satisfaction

Service personnel are individuals who deliver an organisation's service to customers (Meesala, 2018). In this study, service personnel include both academic and supporting staff at the surveyed Universities. These have either direct or indirect contact with the students (herein referred to as customers). Customer satisfaction (CS) is an important component of service marketing. It is a beneficial experience resulting from customers' perceptions of a service provider's offerings relative to their expectations of the service (Marinkovic & Kalinic, 2017). It pertains to how a customer perceives or feels about a product or service they received, in comparison to their expectations (Tahanisaz, 2020). Customer satisfaction aggregates to a consumer's attitude, eagerness, and feeling for a product or service after it has been consumed (Yi et al., 2021). As in this study, customer satisfaction paradigms have been employed in research on business management, economics, housing, marketing, tourism marketing, and psychology (Jiang et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2017).

The recent rapid growth of higher education institutions and the enrolment of university students has underscored the crucial role of service personnel in ensuring customer satisfaction. Customers (hereinafter, University students) regularly rate Universities based on the services they provide and the behaviour of service personnel. Creating and strengthening high-quality service providers is therefore imperative for promoting highly satisfied customers (Uzir et al., 2021; Marinkovic & Kalinic, 2017). Recently, there has been a notable increase in emphasis on service quality and customer satisfaction in universities, attracting the attention of educators, business researchers, university communities, and marketing management professionals. Critical to the realisation of the University's goals is the effective use of service personnel to bridge the gap between students' expectations and the University's actual service performance, thereby achieving customer satisfaction. Numerous studies have shown that service personnel and customer satisfaction are closely related. Uzir et al. (2021) have shown that customer satisfaction is positively affected by Service personnel. Keh et al. (2013) reported that Service personnel attributes lead to customer satisfaction. Equally, Service personnel characteristics have been identified as influencing customer satisfaction (Aslam et al., 2021; Froehle, 2006). Therefore, based on this discussion, it is hypothesised as follows:

H₁- Service personnel have a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction and WoM

The WoM is verbal, person-to-person information from perceived non-commercial communicators. The WoM comprises informal communication, whether positive or negative, on consumers' experiences with a service or product with others who have shown an interest in buying the same (Filiari et al., 2021). With this assumption, WoM, according to Park et al. (2021), encompasses interpersonal communication about the consumption of a particular service or product and is also highly effective compared to formal advertising. The WoM might contain both organisational promotional messages and formal customer feedback, such as suggestions and complaints (Marchand et al., 2018). The WoM is also considered a more reliable medium of communication than traditional advertising (i.e., print, radio, and television) (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Therefore, WoM is widely believed to have a substantial impact on consumer buying behaviour (Park et al., 2021), particularly in services such as education, hospitality, and tourism, which an individual consumer cannot easily assess before consumption (Rasheed & Rashid, 2024; Yang & Mattila, 2017). The WoM and Customer satisfaction are highly related in

influencing buyers' decisions. Customer satisfaction refers to the degree of happiness customers experience with a business's offerings, including its products, services, and overall capabilities (Hsu, 2018). It serves as a valuable metric for gauging customer emotions and understanding their needs and expectations (Pansar, 2018). In this study, customer satisfaction refers to how a university student feels after reserving a service and to the service provider's effectiveness in ensuring that customers are pleased and their needs are fulfilled. In the realm of service marketing, customer satisfaction is an essential factor that significantly affects WoM among prospective customers (Souki et al., 2024; Marcos & Coelho, 2022; Le et al., 2021; Syah & Wijoyo, 2021). When a customer is considered satisfied with the brand and its associated elements, it strongly influences her intentions, leading her to make a positive decision. Following these discussions, it is hypothesised that:

H₂- Customer satisfaction has a significant positive effect on word of mouth

Service personnel and WoM

The nexus between service personnel and WoM has attracted significant attention in the service industry literature. In this study, service personnel comprise both academic staff and administrative staff in the surveyed Universities. These have either direct or indirect contact with the students (herein referred to as customers). The characteristics of the "service personnel" were contextualised in the current study through WoM. Previous studies have identified that positive WoM is associated with characteristics of service personnel who interact either directly or indirectly with customers (Jalilvandi et al., 2017). In higher education, studies (e.g., Dandis et al., 2022; Handayanto, 2018; Casidy & Wymer, 2015) suggest that relationships between service personnel and students (i.e., customers) significantly influence WoM. Hence, it is proposed that:

H₃-Service personnel have a significant positive effect on word of mouth.

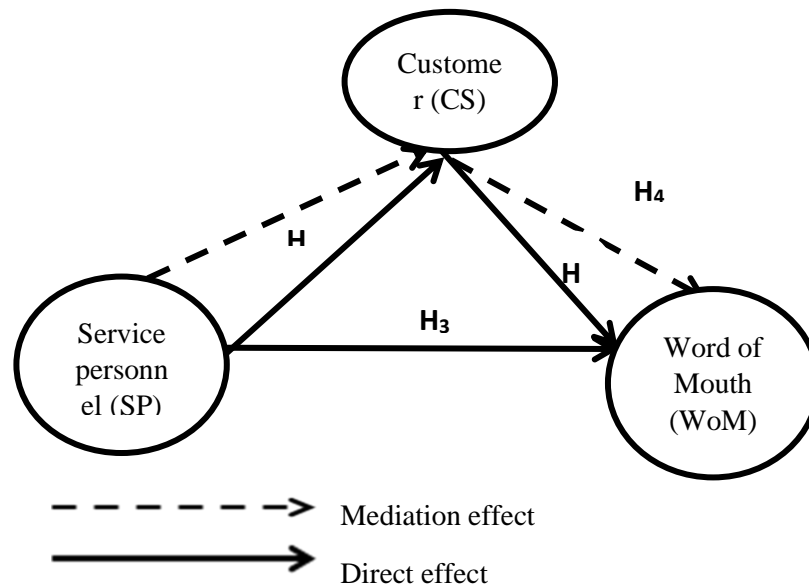
Customer satisfaction as a mediator

Characteristics of Service personnel influence WoM (Zhang et al., 2022; Jalilvand et al., 2017; Gremler et al., 2001). Similarly, customer satisfaction influences WoM too (Rasheed & Rashid, 2024). Service personnel likely directly affect customer satisfaction (Aslam et al., 2021; Froehle, 2006). Nevertheless, there is an implicit effect of Service personnel on WoM, with customer satisfaction acting as a mediator. It is therefore essential to examine both direct and indirect effects to examine the mediation effect. Customer satisfaction serves as an effective mediator between service personnel and WoM, providing a considerable indirect effect. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H₄: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service personnel and word of mouth.

Given this background, a conceptual path diagram is developed to summarise these four hypotheses (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Conceptual framework



SOURCE: Literature, 2024

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

Study area, research design, sampling procedures and sample size

This study was conducted in the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Students from the trio of universities in the region, i.e., KCMC University, Mwenge Catholic University (MWECAU) and Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU) were involved as respondents. The three Universities constituted the unit of analysis, and 16,586 students established the unit of observation. The study used a sample of 201 university students (Yamane, 1967). The sample size is acceptable for multivariate analysis (Hair et al., 2014), including the Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM) employed in this research. A stratified random sampling method was adopted due to the heterogeneous characteristics of the study population.

Data collection

In this study, data were collected through a survey administered to students at three Universities. Before the actual survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 pilot respondents. Terminology was adjusted to reflect respondents' feedback and to confirm the validity of the survey questionnaire. The survey consisted of two categories of questions: socio-demographic characteristics of university students and respondents' perceptions of service personnel, customer satisfaction, and WoM in higher education (see Table 1).

Measures

Service personnel and Customer satisfaction were measured using a 5-item scale adopted from Hsu (2018) and Goyette et al. (2010). All three variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to agree 5=strongly. Customer WoM was measured using a scale adopted from

Kazungu and Kubenea (2023) and Goyette et al. (2010). The WoM was rated from 1=zero extent, 2=little extent, 3=moderate extent, 4=great extent, to 5=very great extent.

Data Analysis

In this research, data analysis was performed using Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed to validate the measurement model. Path analysis was used to assess the causality between the predictor and outcome variables. The mediating effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between service personnel and WoM was analysed using a bootstrap sample of 201 observations.

Common method bias

Statistical controls were used to examine the occurrence of the common method bias. We adopted Harman's single-factor test, which is the most often used technique. Harman's single-factor score requires that all items be loaded onto a single common factor, with the total variance not exceeding 50%. The findings reveal that all single factors in this study remained below the 50% threshold. This confirms that the data used in this study are free from the most prevalent forms of common method bias. During data collection, we decided not to inform the sampled University students of the study's objective; however, we assured them that their participation would be confidential and anonymous. This was done to ensure that we control the common bias problem during data collection (Ismail, 2025; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

The findings in Table 1 reveal that 61.7 % of the respondents were male, while 38.3% were female. This implies that most students at universities around Kilimanjaro are male, indicating male dominance over their female counterparts. Socio-cultural attitudes are the main cause of many male students' university experiences compared to females. Many tribes in Tanzania still maintain a male-dominant culture, in which families believe that only males need higher education and that females should remain at home to manage household responsibilities. Most University students are aged 21–30 (53.7%), followed by those aged under 20. This indicates that a substantial number of university students are aged 19-29. This is attributed to changes in the education system, in which children now start school at a young age, such as in standard one at 6 years, and begin university education at a young age, often less than 20 years old (URT, 2023).

It is important to know students' ages, as they influence WoM in two ways. Students aged 21-30 are more communicative and can influence their choice of university, so they are known to have greater power in WoM than other age groups. This is supported by the programme of study, with the majority of sampled University students taking Undergraduate degree programmes (86.6%), followed by postgraduate programmes (12.9%) and non-degree programmes (1.5%). This diversity in the programme of study among respondents indicates that many University students are at the degree level, due to changes in labour market demand that require many employment opportunities in Tanzania to be skills-based graduates. Thus, many students are struggling to acquire higher education. The level of education has implications for WoM, as students can influence young people to pursue their careers and join the same Universities. Their ability to influence is based on the quality of university education and labour market conditions (Ismail, 2025; Ali et al., 2016).

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of respondents

Variable	Category	Counts (201)	Per cent (%)
Gender	Male	125	62
	Female	76	38
Age bracket	<20	39	37.3
	21-30	56	53.7
	31-40	10	9.0
Programme of study	Non-degree programme	3	1.5
	Degree programme	172	85.6
	Postgraduate programme	26	12.9

Source: Authors, 2024

Sampling adequacy of the measurement items

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was used to examine the sampling adequacy. Results indicate a KMO of 0.744 for service personnel, 0.743 for customer satisfaction and 0.735 for WoM. These results are significantly higher than the test's critical level of significance of 0.5 (Field, 2013; Kaiser, 1974). Results for the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity are significantly high (i.e., Chi-square=193.463 with 21 degrees of freedom, at $P<0.05$) for service personnel, (i.e., Chi-square=356.584 alongside 10 degrees of freedom, $P<0.05$) for customer satisfaction, and (Chi-square =527.70 alongside 190 degrees of freedom, $P<0.05$) for WoM. These results provide a strong justification for performing further statistical analysis.

Factor analysis of the measurement items

To determine internal consistency and convergent validity, a Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. Service personnel had seven (7) scales, and five (5) measurement items were observed to be reliable. All the measurement variables in Customer satisfaction and WoM were reliable. The observed values for AVE and Composite Reliability (CRCRCR) exceeded the required thresholds (Chen et al., 2011). Also, all factor loadings fell within the acceptable range of 0.5 or higher, indicating construct reliability (Hair et al., 2014) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Service personnel measurement model

Item	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Service Personnel		0.966	0.828
Employees provided you with personalised attention	0.858		
Employees understood your specific needs	0.779		
Employees treated you with respect	0.651		
Employees solved any dissatisfactory with service issues	0.994		
Employees are always willing to help	0.883		
Customer satisfaction		0.864	0.758
Are you satisfied with the staff's helpfulness	0.697		
The University is delivering customer value	0.796		
Are you satisfied with the range of facilities	0.519		
University meets customer requirements	0.849		
University meets customer expectations	0.873		
WoM		0.864	0.758

WoM intensity	0.643
Positive WoM	0.896
Negative WoM	0.819
WoM content	0.639

Source: Authors, 2024

Evaluation of the structural model and hypothesis test

The overall goodness-of-fit statistics suggest the structural model fits the data well, with $\chi^2=86.975$ ($p<0.05$, $df=79$), and χ^2/df (1.100949) is less than the acceptance threshold of 3 (Bollen, 1989; Hooper et al., 2008). The fit indices from other models have shown acceptable values, specifically: $RMR < 0.05$, $GFI > 0.80$ and $RMSEA$ (0.059) < 0.095 . This indicates that all indicators meet the accepted criteria. The asymptotic fitness measurements show that RFI (0.981), $AGFI$ (0.966), NFI (0.816), IFI (0.962), TLI (0.945), and CFI (0.861) are all above 0.80 (Table 3). Also, summarised fitness measurements indicate that $PCFI$ (0.978), $PNFI$ (0.646), and $PGFI$ (0.556) exceed 0.5 (Table 3). This suggests that all indicators have successfully reached the acceptable levels, affirming that the theoretical model demonstrates a strong overall fit (Hair et al., 2006).

The study analysed the relationship between service personnel and WoM among University students, with customer satisfaction as a mediating variable (Figure 1). To achieve this, we used the constructs to develop four relationships with four hypotheses. After confirming the structural goodness-of-fit, the four hypotheses were tested using Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM). The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3. The first hypothesised association concerns the influence of service personnel on customer satisfaction. The findings reveal a negative, insignificant relationship ($\beta = -0.651$; $p\text{-value} > 0.05$). Hence, hypothesis one (H_1) is not supported. The second relationship is on the effect of customer satisfaction on WoM. Findings reveal a positive, significant relationship ($\beta = 0.863$; $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Thus, hypothesis two (H_2) is supported. This implies that a unit of customer satisfaction increases WoM by 86.3%. The third hypothesised relationship is on the impact of service personnel on WoM. Findings reveal a positive, significant relationship ($\beta = 0.731$; $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis three (H_3) is supported. This means that a unit increase in service personnel increases WoM by 73.1%.

Table 3: Path analysis

	Path models	Path coefficient	S.E.	CRCRCR	p-value	Decision
H_1	SP---CS	-0.651	0.678	-0.960	0.337	Not supported
H_2	CS---WoM	0.863	0.140	6.166	***	Support
H_3	SP---WoM	0.731	0.133	5.513	***	Support

Note(s): Structural model fit indices: $NFI=0.816$, $AGFI=0.966$, $RFI=0.981$, $CFI=0.861$, $IFI=0.962$, $TLI=0.945$, $RMSEA=0.059$; $\chi^2=86.975$; and χ^2/df 1.100949; *** = Sign indicates a probability lesser than 5% (0.05).

WoM= Word of Mouth, SP= Service Personnel CS= Customer satisfaction

Source: Authors, 2024

Testing Mediating Effect

To examine the mediation role of customer satisfaction in the relationship between service personnel and WoM, a bootstrap sample of 201 was used. Results in Table 4 highlight the mediation analysis outcomes, indicating a full mediation relationship. Hereafter, it is concluded that customer satisfaction mediates the

relationship between service personnel and WoM. Therefore, hypothesis four (H₄) is supported. Thus, customer satisfaction plays an essential role in linking service personnel and WoM.

Table 4: Model relation and mediator path analysis

Relationship	Direct without	Direct with	Mediation
SP→CS→WoM	0.564(0.001)	0.765(0.001)	Full mediation

Source: Authors, 2024

RESULTS

This study assesses the mediating effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between service personnel and WoM among university students. The study was also designed to examine the direct influence of service personnel on customer satisfaction, and the relationship between service personnel and customer satisfaction on WoM. Overall, results on the direct effects of customer satisfaction and service personnel on WoM reveal the importance of these constructs as the most important components of the relationship between universities as brands and students, who are herein referred to as customers. University students who are well served by the University lecturers and supporting staff will end up communicating positive WoM about the University. The existence of interpersonal relationships among employees and customers is closely linked to customers' intention to engage in WOM (Battour et al., 2025; Pang & Wang, 2025; Ma & Kim, 2022). These results suggest that University employees who provide personalised attention, understand students' specific needs, demonstrate problem-solving skills, and are willing to help and treat students with respect are important determinants of excellent service personnel. The probable explanation is that lecturers and support staff with such skills will help university students feel that the promises made by the University prior to their enrollment have been met, and that they will communicate positively about the University to others. Thus, to increase students' positive WOM intention, Universities should encourage lecturers and supporting staff to personally interact with students to support students' campus life and problem-solving learning.

Likely, university students who are highly satisfied with the services provided will be strong brand ambassadors and tend to spread positive WoM about the University. Students tend to be satisfied with the quality of services offered by universities, as reflected in variables such as staff helpfulness, the University's ability to deliver a wide range of in-campus services, customer value, and the University's ability to meet both their requirements and expectations. This supports findings by Battour et al. (2025), Ismail (2025), Sutriani et al. (2024), Sun et al. (2021), and Meilatinova (2021), who observed that customer satisfaction is highly related to WOM intentions. Customers' satisfaction is highly dependent on the set of motivations given to employees. Thus, universities should invest in motivating lecturers and supporting staff by providing both job- and social-related motivations to promote positive WoM (Rasheed & Rashid, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022).

Moreover, negative and insignificant results were found in the relationship between service personnel and customer satisfaction. The common practice is for service personnel to help customers understand and manage their emotions, which are essential to increasing customers' likelihood of satisfaction with the service. Indeed, the more University students are exposed to competent and experienced lecturers and supporting staff, the more they cultivate positive images, perceptions, and attitudes that can make them

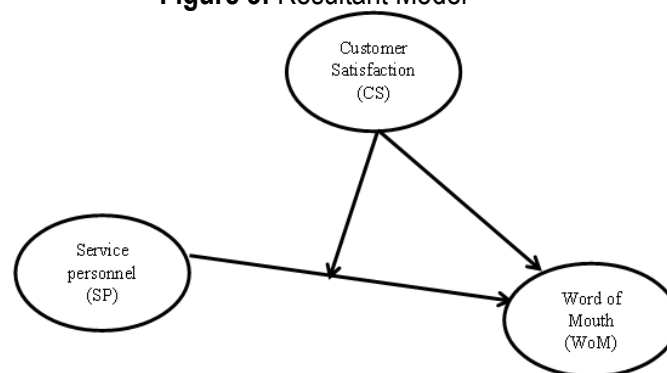
satisfied with the service rendered by the specific University and realise their dreams upon graduation. This observation contradicts the findings of Ndura et al. (2025) and Ismail (2022), who suggested that individual competencies among service personnel, specifically lecturers in higher education institutions, increase the likelihood that students realise the promises made by the institutions. Generally, to promote customer satisfaction, Wang (2025), Son et al. (2021), and Masserini et al. (2019) suggest the need for a favourable service climate, which results from improvements in the working environment and employee training in the service.

The study further examined the effect of customer satisfaction as a mediator of the relationship between service personnel and WoM. Results reveal a full mediation effect, indicating that satisfaction among university students plays a critical role in linking service personnel to WoM. The main message from this discussion is that if Universities can build mutual interest between themselves and students, students will be strong brand ambassadors and reciprocate positively. This can be achieved by ensuring competent service personnel who can engage University students in ways that cultivate and promote positive WoM. Therefore, universities ought to consider students' expectations regarding the ways and means they offer to develop the competencies of service personnel. Otherwise, it will breach the psychological agreement between students and the University, thereby leading to negative WoM about the University. This corroborates Ndura et al. (2025), Ismail (2022), and Masserini et al. (2019), who testified that students usually build strong ties with the Institution if at all service personnel can guide them in realising their dreams. Findings further aligned with de Oliveira (2025) and Teichmann et al. (2025). Zahid (2024), Huang et al. (2024), and Juliana et al. (2024) affirmed that service encounters indirectly influence patient WoM through satisfaction, highlighting that fostering WoM and emotionally connecting with consumers are essential for delivering quality service. In general, service personnel and customer satisfaction are important facilitators and vital elements that should be leveraged to enhance WoM intentions during service encounters.

Resultant model

According to the current study's findings, the association between service personnel and customer satisfaction was negative and insignificant; therefore, the proposed relationship is not supported. However, the predicted relations between customer satisfaction and WOM, and between service personnel and WoM, were positive and significant. Likely, the study found that customer satisfaction fully mediated the relationship between service personnel and WoM. This leads to the development of the resultant model for the Service Personnel-Customer Satisfaction-WoM relationship as summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Resultant Model



Source: Literature Review

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the critical interplay among university service staff, student satisfaction, and word of mouth in Tanzanian universities. Findings indicate that excellent service significantly enhances student satisfaction, which, in turn, fosters positive word of mouth. Hence, it is concluded that, to improve services, universities should adopt policies to train service staff to meet students' needs and expectations. Universities have to invest in developing policy mechanisms for feedback to refine services further and maximise student engagement. Ultimately, prioritising these elements will create stronger relationships with students, enhance the institutional image, and advance higher education in Tanzania.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is one of the few scholarly works to explore the influence of service personnel on WoM intentions among universities in emerging economies, helping them become marketing-oriented and compete in the international market. Findings indicate a positive, significant relationship among service personnel, customer satisfaction, and WoM. However, a negative and insignificant relationship was found between service personnel and customer satisfaction. Therefore, Universities should prioritise identifying and improving lecturers' and supporting staff's skills and abilities to pay customised attention, understand, and address students' needs, and to treat students with respect and a willingness to help. This will enable the University, through its personnel, to fulfil the promises it has made to its students and meet their expectations. Universities should also recognise the importance of meeting students' expectations by building and promoting beneficial relationships with them. Therefore, Universities, through their service personnel, need to understand each student's expectations and use that information to build virtuous relationships with them.

The findings of this study have critical policy implications for universities in emerging economies seeking to enhance their marketing orientation and competitive stance in the international landscape. The research highlights a positive, significant correlation among service personnel, customer satisfaction, and WoM intentions, underscoring the vital role that lecturers and staff play in shaping students' perceptions and experiences. However, it also notes a concerning negative relationship that warrants immediate attention. Thus, universities should implement policies focused on the professional development of service personnel, emphasising skills such as personalised attention, empathy, and effective problem-solving to meet students' diverse needs. By doing so, institutions can reinforce their commitments to students, ensure expectations are met, and foster stronger relationships. Universities should also prioritise policies that aim to understand each student's individual expectations, as this knowledge is instrumental in building trust and cultivating positive, long-term relationships. These strategies may include personalised outreach programs, feedback mechanisms, and mentorship initiatives to understand better and align with each student's expectations, thereby promoting trust and long-term relationships. Overall, a strategic emphasis on enhancing service personnel capabilities will not only improve student satisfaction but also encourage positive WoM, positioning universities more favourably in a competitive market.

This study has effectively applied the Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory, which posits that students join universities based on their expectations. Universities usually make promises to their customers, herein defined as university students. The study's findings reveal that service personnel's competencies and the fulfilment of psychological contracts are positively associated with university students' WoM intentions. Equally, the Expectation-Disconfirmation theory suggests that dissatisfaction among university students is determined by the disconfirmation of previously used services, as well as their expectations for the disruptive services provided by the University. Thus, for universities to understand students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction, they must learn to recognise their past experiences. Thus, the use of EDT in University

education is very important, as it provides useful insights into students' satisfaction levels, their intention to continue using University services, and their intention to disseminate positive WoM. The use of EDT in this study, therefore, contributes to the existing literature on the relevance of service personnel's competency in fulfilling the psychological contracts, ultimately enhancing students' satisfaction levels and promoting positive WoM intentions.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The findings of this study were established through a cross-sectional research design, in which data were collected at a single point in time. This approach neither assures the representativeness of the selected time frame nor permits a critical analysis of behaviours over the chosen time period. Therefore, future studies should adopt a longitudinal design to determine whether customer satisfaction and positive WoM intentions persist over time. The use of longitudinal data will result in a far more effective assessment of the influence of service personnel and customer satisfaction on WoM. Furthermore, a longitudinal study is more likely to yield a more comprehensive picture of the mediating role of customer satisfaction in the service personnel-WoM relationship. Future research can apply the same econometric model to other service sectors, such as tourism, banking, health, and telecommunications, to examine the prevailing relationships among similar variables. Future studies could explore service encounters in online WoM, the effect of WoM on the University's brand reputation, and the impact of service staff on the University's brand image.

Authors' Contribution

Isaac Kazungu: Conceptualisation, Literature Review, Data Analysis, Manuscript writing

Venance Shilling: Literature Review, Data collection, and analysis

Hadija Kubenea: Data Collection and manuscript writing

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