

Service quality, country image, and word-of-mouth communication in higher education

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Abstract

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Countries can provide education services in other countries, whether for profit or otherwise. Thus, the relationship between perceived educational service quality (PESQ), country image (CI) and word-of-mouth communication (WOM) are discussed from different perspectives in the study. By examining these relations, this paper aims to contribute to the education services strategies of countries within the framework of the marketing discipline in higher education (HE). Research data were obtained from students in the preparatory foreign language class at a state university in Kyrgyzstan (n=103). Data were collected using questionnaires, and hypotheses were tested using the structural equation model. The findings obtained in this study showed that the students' PESQ positively affected the CI concerning the provision of education services and their WOM. The CI partially mediated the relationship between students' PESQ and their WOM.

Key words

education service quality, country image, word-of-mouth communication.

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Introduction

Services, which are economic activities that value and benefit their consumers, are generally regarded as intangible goods, and have become an integral part of modern society. A service can be defined as the co-creation of value due to the application of knowledge and skills (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). Service marketing, which contributes to the emergence and promotion of this value in the best way, is critical, especially in today's

competitive conditions. Service quality, which is explained by the difference between expectations and perceptions in the past (Parasuraman et al., 2002), has been updated by means of Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) theory to reflect that value which the firm and the customer co-create (Hau and Thuy, 2012). Developments in information-communication technologies and globalisation have increased competition, which has led

to the emergence of new ideas and the development of the service sector. The service trade has grown by 5.4% annually on a global scale since 2005, and the most common services are distribution and financial services. The least developed countries constituted 0.3% of global service exports and 0.9% of global service imports in 2017, representing an increase. Trade is increasing rapidly, especially in sectors such as education and health (WTO, 2019). Universities are crucial to research based on the service marketing discipline. Thus, the number of studies examining service quality and the dimensions thereof has been increasing in recent years.

Perceived service quality is seen as a judgment regarding the supremacy of service. Quality perception, expressed as the difference between service efficiency and customer expectations, is the comparison of actual performance and expectations (Polkinghorne et al., 2020). Students are considered the main customers of educational institutions (Hill, 1995; Sakthivel et al., 2005). For this reason, education services can also be marketed (Mazzarol, 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). The fact that students are seen as customers in higher education (HE) has had a significant impact on the understanding of the concept of service quality (Tsiligiris and Hill, 2021). It is said that services can be considered high quality if they meet or exceed students' educational expectations in HE. One of the most important dimensions of service quality is responsiveness (Sanjay and Govender, 2018). The most crucial aspect of the educational process is its quality, which refers to comparing students' expectations and perceptions regarding curriculum, instruction and assessment (Yin et al., 2016). In this context, countries can cooperate with HE in different countries and provide training services. In particular, Turkey contributes to this process with its own academic staff in higher education institutions (HEIs). Due to its historical background, it cooperates with institutions especially in the Balkans

and Central Asia. One of the most critical elements in this process is undoubtedly the trainers. Thus, the responsible and sensitive behaviour of trainers is critical, as education services play a vital role in human life (Hau and Thuy, 2016). In this context, the current study focused on trainers.

Image consists of emotions and perceptions (Papadopoulos, 1993; Manzoor et al., 2021). Therefore, service quality can lead to a positive image perception and behavioural change in individuals (Chien and Chi, 2019). Image management in HEIs can enable them to be competitive in the market. Country image (CI) is generally attitudes towards the people and products of that country (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016). It is also defined as the sum of people's opinions, impressions and beliefs about a place (Lu et al., 2016) and is effective in purchasing decisions (Jin et al., 2015). Kan et al. (2014) expressed CI as the intellectual representation of a country's people, national symbols, culture and products. Many studies have been conducted on CI over the past decades. In this process, it is possible to observe that the concept of CI has become more comprehensive and is no longer limited to the context of consumption (Lu et al., 2019). However, we should remember that there is no consensus on the conceptualisation of CI, which has been a significant and popular area for decades (Laroche et al., 2005; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Wang et al., 2012). CI studies focus on country product image and product evaluations (Wang et al., 2012; Murtiasih et al., 2014). In general, it is seen to be limited for the service sector and HEIs.

Word-of-mouth communication (WOM), or the informal communication of product or service features, can be a powerful source of persuasive information (Arndt, 1967; Moore and Lafreniere, 2020; Harrison-Walker, 2001). When consumers' expectations are exceeded, they can spread positive WOM to others regarding the service provider (Shi et al., 2016). Consumers exposed to positive

WOM will show a more significant trend towards purchasing services (Mazzarol et al., 2007). WOM, which plays an essential role in developing attitudes towards the institution or behaviour (Sen and Lerman, 2007; Murtiasih et al., 2014), is accepted as a necessary form of communication for service marketing (Murray, 1991; Mangold et al., 1999). In today's competitive conditions, where the quality of products and services is crucial, sustainable business activities require quality production. However, while the quality of the products can be easily measured because they are tangible, it can be said that the quality of service is challenging to measure because it depends on many factors (Calma and Dickson-Deane, 2020). The service sector, which constitutes most trade in developed economies and is rapidly growing in developing economies, is neglected in global trade discussions because it is less tangible and complex (WTO, 2019). Despite the significance of service quality, CI and WOM in different sectors, which have been mentioned in previous studies, an understanding of the relations between these three conceptual structures still remains a significant challenge.

The literature has examined the relationships between service quality, corporate image, and reputation in HE from different perspectives (Sultan and Wong, 2019). There is a strong positive relationship between perceived CI and corporate image. These findings are supported by studies in different sectors (Lopez et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2019). Previous studies supported the effect of CI on brand/product image based on halo theory – in other words, the CI creates a halo effect that shapes consumer perceptions of products (Han, 1990). In summary, they considered CI the dependent variable. However, the halo theory reversed course with the idea that the already existing CI could improve. In other words, the effect of product image on CI is defended (Lee et al., 2016; Woo, 2019). Service quality affects attitudes and behaviours. Students' positive

perceptions of services may affect WOM (Jiewanto et al., 2012) and CI. Countries participate in different countries' educational service activities (branch campus, sponsorship, partnership, etc.). However, how service evaluations affect CI and its results remain unclear. Considering the changing society, developments around the world and the dynamic structure of HE, the necessity of understanding the relationship between perceived education service quality (PESQ), CI and WOM emerge. Therefore, this study proposes a structural model and offers theoretical and practical implications in line with this model.

1. Literature review

In the marketing literature, one may observe that the term 'image' is used to evaluate the general perceptions of consumers (Mostafa et al., 2015; Laroche et al., 2005). The overall image of a service provider is influenced by the quality of services provided (Ali et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2009). Li et al. (2014) have claimed that CI affects consumer purchase intentions. It is also emphasised that with the rapid increase in global trade, CI has become a significant intuitive measure of quality for consumers (Lascu et al., 2020). The relationships between education service quality and corporate image or reputation have been examined (Sultan and Wong, 2019; Hwang and Choi, 2019). In addition, the quality of the programme, which is important for providing quality education services to students, has a positive effect on the image of the institution (Osman et al., 2020). A limited number of studies have also discovered the effect of CI on perceived HE quality (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016). However, there is a need to understand the relationship between the PESQ and CI. Countries can provide educational services in different countries with conditions such as a branch campus, sponsorship and partnership. For instance, there are HEIs with which Turkey cooperates in the

scope of education services in Central Asia. This can affect the image of the service host country. Given increased globalisation and the educational service activities of nations in different countries, the relationship between PESQ and CI and the importance thereof draw attention. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H1: Students' perception of education service quality has a positive effect on the image of the country directly providing education

The perception of the CI, where consumer perceptions may function as quality signals (Batra et al., 2000), may affect consumer evaluations positively or negatively (Paswan and Sharma, 2004). It is emphasised that WOM, which has been extensively researched in the literature, plays a significant role in consumer attitudes and behaviours (Murtiasih et al., 2014). However, studies on WOM and image have generally focused on brand image and the image of an institution or destination. Researchers have examined WOM as an important factor influencing consumers' perceptions and attitudes (Woodside et al., 1992; Sen and Lerman, 2007). Studies investigating the relationship between CI and WOM are limited in the literature (Xiao et al., 2016). However, it is emphasised that WOM is one of the primary sources of image formation (Yavas and Shemwell, 1996). An image emerges as an attitude arising from service quality and mediates the loyalty relationship (Sultan and Wong, 2012). The relationship between student satisfaction, loyalty and WOM has been confirmed in HE (Giovanis et al., 2014). In this context, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H2: The image of a country providing education has direct positive effects on students' WOM

The main purpose of HEIs is to provide perceived service quality (Russell, 2005). Institutions focus on service quality to develop a competitive advantage. In this context,

WOM can be effective in evaluating service providers, as it affects expectations and perceptions (Woodside et al., 1992; Ennew et al., 2000). For years, researchers have focused on WOM, product and service advice among consumers (Arndt, 1967; Ennew et al., 2000; Shi et al., 2016). Previous studies provide sufficient evidence that perceived service quality positively affects satisfaction. Some studies found that service quality in different sectors affects WOM, whether directly or indirectly (Leppäniemi et al., 2017; Choudhury, 2014). Casidy (2014) noted that students' perception of university brand management significantly mediates the relationship between service quality, loyalty and WOM. Chang et al. (2013) reported that satisfaction is positively associated with behavioural intent and significantly mediates the impacts of service quality on WOM. Jiewanto et al. (2012) found that service quality positively affects student satisfaction and university image. They also found that university image affects WOM. Service quality leads the WOM (Manohar, 2018). In line with the above information, the following hypotheses were determined:

H3a: Students' perception of education service quality has a direct positive effect on their WOM

H3b: The image of a country providing education plays a mediating role in the impact of students' perception of education service quality on their WOM

2. Theoretical underpinnings and proposed model

According to the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) theory, the fundamental element of change is service. In this process, the actors must have the knowledge and skills to process resources. An actor's knowledge and skill form the basis of SDL theory. Because these actors are co-creators of service or val-

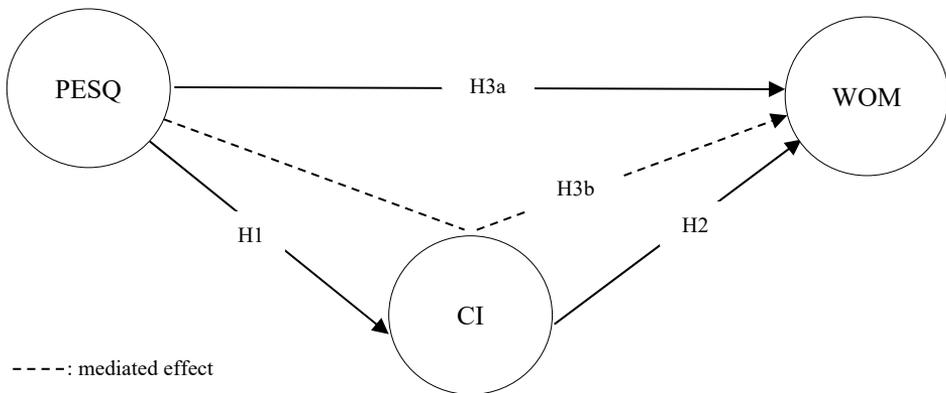
ue (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), service quality, which is related to the concept of value (Gummesson, 2008), should be developed and increased with consumer participation. HEIs are also service organisations that co-create value with trainers, students and other staff (El Alfy, 2021). Although the current study focuses on the quality of services provided by trainers in HE, value is co-created with students.

It is possible to observe that CI is supported by theories such as the halo theory (Han, 1990; Han, 1989), image transfer (Zhang et al., 2019) and memory theory (Lee et al., 2016). However, attitude theory, which consists of cognitive, affective and behavioural components, has been expressed as an effective method by means of which to explain consumer behaviour and CI (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). Attitude theory is a branch of social psychology that studies how people make evaluations. Attitude is defined as a general assessment of a concept or object (Athiyaman, 1997). Focusing on the cognitive component of attitudes (such as country development, wealth and technological level) in consumer product evaluations

may not explain negative attitudes. The affective component of attitudes (such as appreciation, love, trust, friendship and cooperation) should also be considered (Wang et al., 2012). Additionally, WOM is a powerful tool for developing attitudes and behaviour, including for non-profits (Lang and Lawson, 2013). It is the behavioural expression of customer engagement (An et al., 2019). Thus, the relationships among PESQ, CI and WOM are supported by attitude theory within the scope of SDL.

In the literature, the concepts of service quality, satisfaction, loyalty (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019), WOM and image are related variables (Jiewanto et al., 2012). Accordingly, they express the idea that graduate students can say positive things about their university and encourage others to enrol in their university. However, to the best of our knowledge, to date there has not yet been any study evaluating the three conceptual structures mentioned above in the literature. Therefore, this study aims to structurally analyse the relationship between PESQ, CI and WOM. The structural model created for this research is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research model



Source: own elaboration

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

The population of this study consisted of foreign language preparatory students at a state university in Kyrgyzstan. These students took only Turkish education for one year while starting HE. Language education for students was provided by trainers whose native language was Turkish. Thus, this research did not cover the whole of the HEI, but only students of the School of Foreign Languages. HEIs established by agreement between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan have been active for nearly 30 years. There are trainers from Kyrgyzstan and Turkey in many departments of the relevant HEI. However, only trainers from Turkey work in the Turkish language department. This situation supports the sampling and very specific selection of this category of students in line with the purpose and scope of the research. The online questionnaire was conducted in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The link to the survey was delivered to students from each class via the convenience sampling method. The surveyed students encouraged others to participate. Data were collected from 114 students, and 103 questionnaires were included in the analysis after the removal of questionnaires found to be contrary. The sample of the study is sufficient for the structural equation model (SEM) (Hair et al., 2017) considering the number of variables (Stevens, 2012; Tabachnick et al., 2007). The population in this study did not pay for education. Since the sample was students who were undertaking language education, only gender data were taken from the demographic variables. Among the students participating in this research, 67 were female and 36 were

male. The number of women and men was in line with the student distribution stated in the university's annual report.

3.2. Measures

In this study, a five-point Likert scale was used (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Scales were adapted from those approved in the literature. The research includes preparatory class students. Therefore, physical or technical scales were not used. The PESQ is related to trainers whose native language is Turkish. The scale related to trainers, which is one of the dimensions of the service quality scale specified in the literature, was used in this study. The literature has measured multidimensional CI. Each study handled these structures with different dimensions (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 1984; Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Lala et al., 2008). Furthermore, some studies have classified them further as macro (country) and micro (product) CI (Vijaranakorn and Shannon, 2017). Lin and Chen (2006) took into account the product-service perception along with the general CI. Herrero-Crespo et al. (2016) considered only the hidden structure of CI and estimated its relationship with other variables. They also argued that it is as valid as the approach involving multidimensional measurement. This study refers to Martin and Eroglu (1993) for CI. In addition, Lin and Chen (2006) measure the CI with reference. WOM plays a role as a dimension of behavioural intention in the marketing literature (Jiewanto et al., 2012). In this context, referring to Goyette et al. (2010) and Chang et al. (2013), the WOM scale was designed to collect empirical data on their recommendation of the university (related to Turkey) and Turkey.

Table 1. Scale of the research

Variable		Measures	Adapted
Perceived Education Service Quality	PESQ1	Instructors are sensitive when it comes to our education	(Lagrosen et al., 2004) (Yildiz and Kara, 2009) (Annamdevula and Bellamkonda, 2016)
	PESQ2	I can easily reach instructors	
	PESQ3	Instructors improve students' knowledge	
	PESQ4	Instructors constantly evaluate our performance	
	PESQ5	Instructors treat all students equally	
	PESQ6	Instructors are open to feedback to provide better education services	
Country Image	CI1	I trust Turkey	(Martin and Eraglu, 1993) (Lin and Chen, 2006)
	CI2	Education is great with instructors from Turkey	
	CI3	Turkey's education and service quality is quite good	
Word-of-Mouth Communication	WOM1	I would recommend my university to my friends	(Goyette et al., 2010) (Chang et al., 2013)
	WOM2	I say positive things about Turkey	
	WOM3	I like to talk about Turkey	
	WOM4	I am proud to talk about Turkey	

Source: own elaboration

4. Analysis of research data

The data obtained as a result of the survey were processed in the IBM SPSS Statistics 24 package programme. Descriptive statistics were applied. First, exploratory factor analysis was performed using varimax rotation. Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis was applied. CB-SEM was used because the research model was not complicated, and the data were normally distributed (Astrachan et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2017). The IBM SPSS AMOS 21 package programme was used to test the structural relationships in the research model.

The data must be normal or close to normal in statistical studies. Therefore, this study first applied descriptive analysis of the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis (Huang et al., 2004). As a result of the analy-

sis, it was seen that the kurtosis and skewness values confirming the normality of the data were between -1.5 and +1.5 (Byrne, 2010). Cronbach's alpha (CA), showing the internal consistency of the scales, was at a reasonable level (Cortina, 1993). CA values of the scale were above 0.70. As a result of the factor analysis, the KMO value was 0.890 and was considered excellent (Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p=.000$) showed that the correlation between measurement items was sufficient and suitable for factor analysis. The eigen-total value of each variable was greater than 1 and was grouped under a single factor. Cumulative variances (minimum threshold of 50%) can be considered good value as they are above 70%. Factor loads are above the threshold value (Hair et al., 2010). The findings reported above are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Question	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perceived Education Service Quality	PESQ1	4.10	0.975	-.909	.417
	PESQ2	4.14	0.960	-1.023	.463
	PESQ3	3.96	0.862	-.673	.457
	PESQ4	4.05	0.943	-.956	.499
	PESQ5	4.13	0.915	-.960	.947
	PESQ6	3.97	0.868	-.859	1.263
Country Image	CI1	4.26	0.960	-1.162	.607
	CI2	4.22	0.959	-1.144	.653
	CI3	3.94	0.861	-.544	.206
Word-of-Mouth Communication	WOM1	4.19	1.094	-1.358	1.149
	WOM2	4.05	0.984	-1.043	1.002
	WOM3	3.99	0.965	-.915	.599
	WOM4	4.17	0.981	-1.483	1.227

Source: own elaboration

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha and factor analysis

Variable	Question	Factor Load		Eigenvalue	Cumulative Variance %	Cronbach's Alpha
		Confirmatory	Exploratory			
Perceived Education Service Quality	PESQ1	0.839	0.811	6.682	51.399	0.917
	PESQ2	0.888	0.756			
	PESQ3	0.783	0.818			
	PESQ4	0.803	0.733			
	PESQ5	0.828	0.820			
	PESQ6	0.714	0.748			
Country Image	CI1	0.805	0.815	1.530	63.168	0.796
	CI2	0.829	0.784			
	CI3	0.628	0.765			
Word-of-Mouth Communication	WOM1	0.927	0.852	1.281	73.020	0.892
	WOM2	0.802	0.756			
	WOM3	0.793	0.797			
	WOM4	0.823	0.819			
KMO: 0.890	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: df : 78 Sig: 0.000 Approx. Chi-Square: 866.923					

Source: own elaboration

Table 4 shows CA, composite reliability (CR), average variance explained (AVE) and the correlation between variables. AVE is an indicator of the convergent validity of structures. CR indicates AVE and the square

thereof. In all variables in this research model, AVE was 0.50, and CR was above 0.80. These results were above the specified threshold values (Hair et al., 2014). There was also a positive correlation between variables.

Table 4. Construct reliability and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	CA	CR	AVE	PESQ	CI	WOM
PESQ	4.056	0.775	0.917	0.920	0.658	1	0.514*	0.583*
CI	4.142	0.782	0.796	0.801	0.576		1	0.500*
WOM	4.099	0.875	0.892	0.904	0.702			1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level [2-tailed]

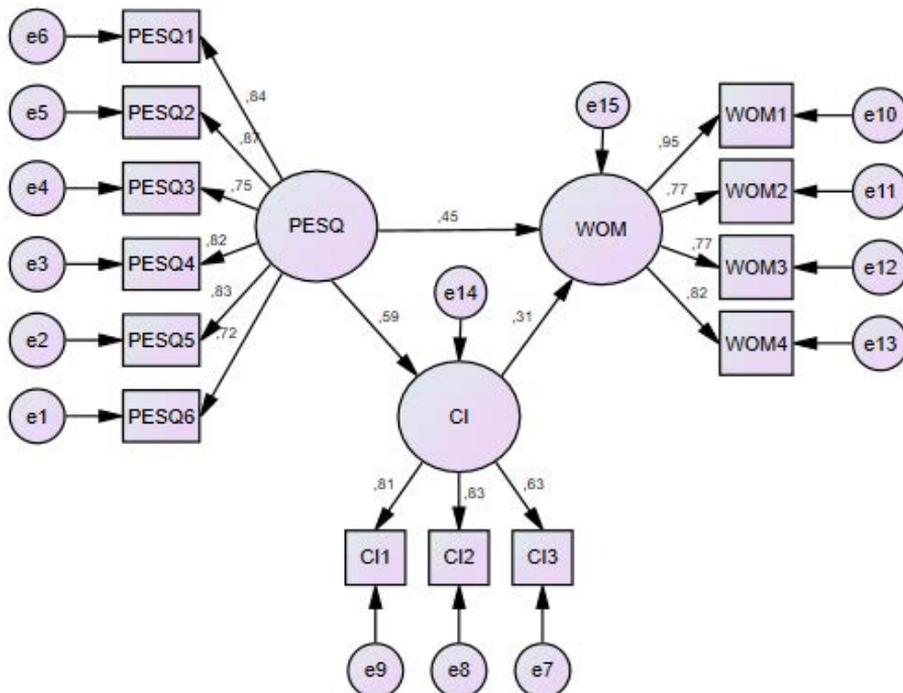
Source: own elaboration

4.1. Structural model and hypothesis tests results

The structural model is known as the equation that measures the relationship between latent variables. SEM is applied to an analysis of the causal relationships suggested in the research model (Del Río-Rama et al., 2021). The structural model has three hidden variables (PESQ as the external hidden variable, CI of the country providing education and WOM as the internal variables). The most

substantial aspect of SEM is that it facilitates the discovery of relationships between variables and can be examined to reduce the error in the model. Therefore, this method helps model structures at a higher level (Hair et al., 2014). In this study, the general fit of the SEM with the conceptual model and hypotheses was tested. The structural model and fit indices are shown in Figure 2 and Table 5.

Figure 2. Structural model



Source: own elaboration

Table 5. Model fit indices

Fit Indices	P	CMIN/DF	RMSEA			GFI	CFI	NFI	IFI	TLI
			LO90	HI90	PCLOSE					
Structural model	0.000	1.349	0.059			0.891	0.974	0.908	0.975	0.967
			0.017	0.089	0.318					

Source: own elaboration

As seen in Table 5, although the model fit indices of the research were generally acceptable, the structural model was modified

to provide the best fit. The fit indices of the results of modification are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Modified Result Fit Indices

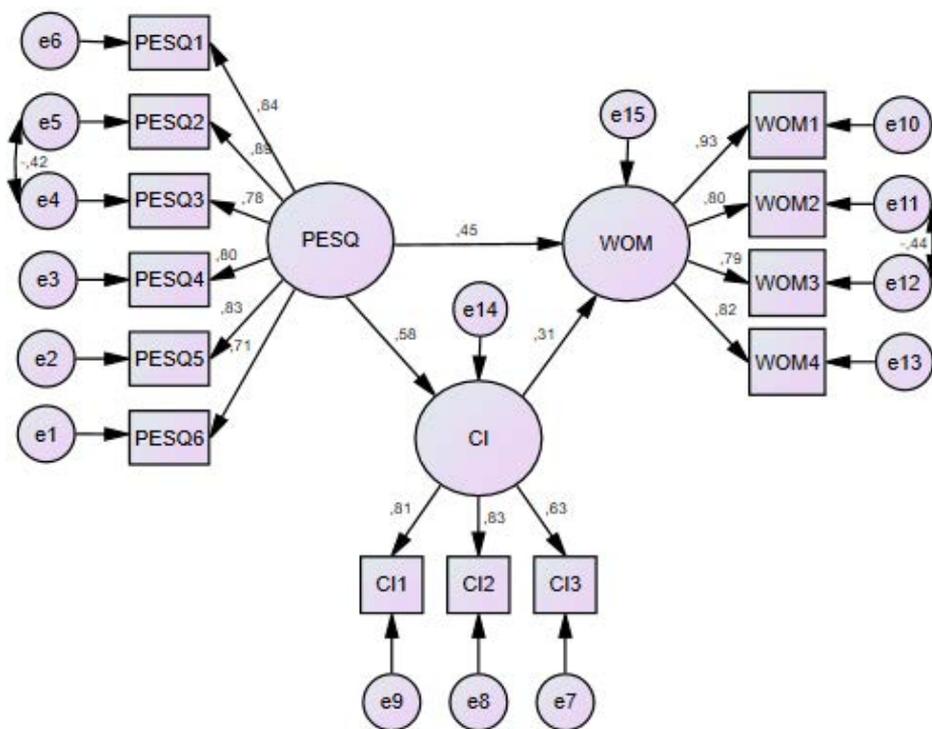
Fit Indices	P	CMIN/DF	RMSEA			GFI	CFI	NFI	IFI	TLI
			LO90	HI90	PCLOSE					
Modified structural model	0.000	1.033	0.018			0.919	0.998	0.932	0.998	0.997
			0.000	0.064	0.840					

Source: own elaboration

It is stated that χ^2/df used in evaluating the fit between the data and the model should take a value below 2.5 if the sample number is less than 250. The value (χ^2/df : 1.033) is less than 2.5. The RMSEA value is 0.018. Especially in AMOS, using a 90% confidence interval is recommended to confirm this value. Table 6 shows that the lower bound of the RMSEA confidence interval is 0.000 and

the upper bound is 0.064. PCLOSE is 0.840 ($p > 0.50$). Thus, it can be said that the model fits the data well (Byrne, 2010). Furthermore, other goodness of fit values were as follows: GFI: 0.919, CFI: 0.998, NFI: 0.932, IFI: 0.998, TLI: 0.997. The data fit of the structured model was at the recommended level (Hair et al., 2010). The modified structural model is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Modified structural model



Source: own elaboration

Table 7. Hypothesis test results

Hypothesis	Direction	Standardised Effect	Standard Error	P-value
H1	Country Image ← Perceived Education Service Quality	0.578	0.117	0.000
H2	Word-of-Mouth Communication ← Country Image	0.307	0.226	0.011
H3a	Word-of-Mouth Communication ← Perceived Education Service Quality	0.452	0.191	0.000

Source: own elaboration

Table 7 shows the relationships between hidden variables considered significant at the 0.05 significance level. According to these results, students' PESQ directly and positively affects the CI of the country providing educa-

tion, which in turn has a direct positive effect on the students' WOM. In addition, students' PESQ has a direct positive effect on their WOM. Thus, in this study, H1, H2 and H3a were supported.

4.2. Mediation analysis

Direct relationships between variables were determined in the structural model. Studies in the literature have tested the relationship between perceived service quality and WOM with different variables (Casidy, 2014; Chang et al., 2013). However, the lack of studies examining the conceptual structures in this research allowed us to recognise the gap and

test the model. Thus, the mediating effect of the CI of the country providing education in the relationship between the PESQ and WOM was also tested in this study. The bias-corrected (BC) bootstrap method, which is applied in the SEM literature (MacKinnon et al., 2004), was used to measure the significance of the mediating effect.

Table 8. Mediation test result

Variables	Standardised Indirect Effect	Lower Bounds	Upper Bounds	Two-tailed Significance	Mediation $p < 0.05$
Perceived Education Service Quality Word-of-Mouth Communication Country Image (Mediator)	0.178	0.035	0.464	0.016	Partial

Source: own elaboration

Table 8 shows the results based on mediation analysis of 2000 bootstrap samples. The results suggest that the CI of the country providing education partially mediates the effects of students' PESQ on their WOM. Thus, in this study, the hypothesis H3b was also supported.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study focuses on PESQ, CI and WOM factors, which are important concepts in the marketing discipline. Service quality, which emerges from meeting the expectations of consumers and conceptualising consumer perceptions, is of vital importance in the HE sector. Understanding service quality in HE is also critical to better management (Sanjay and Govender, 2018). The concept of service quality in HE consists of multiple dimensions covering all factors, such as education, physical facilities and campus life. In the previous literature, it is seen that academic service quality is generally considered in one dimension within multidimensional service quality. Recent studies have discovered that academic service quality can be multidimensional, re-

lated to the course and trainers. For instance, while students may have reservations about the content and length of the course, they may have a positive perception of the trainer's attitude, interest and communication (El Alfy, 2021). Abbas (2020) examined the dimensions of service quality with a holistic perspective and developed the HEISQUAL, comprehensively revealing the trainer service quality in the title of teacher profile. The current study focuses only on the quality of the service provided by the trainer, unlike studies in the literature due to its limitations and purpose. It would be helpful to evaluate the study in this context. Thus, a relationship between the three conceptual structures mentioned above is predicted. In addition, the CI is expected to mediate in the relationship between PESQ and WOM. These expected relationships were supported. No study has examined the relationship between three conceptual structures in HE in the literature. However, in a theoretical sense, the research findings support the existing literature. In particular, it can be said that the findings are consistent with the results of studies in different sectors, including product evaluations and physical quality perceptions in various

services. For instance, a relationship between service quality and WOM was found in the banking (Choudhury, 2014), airline (Liu and Lee, 2016), and travel agency sectors (Mohtasham et al., 2017). Previous studies also support the relationship between service quality and WOM in HEI both directly and indirectly (Teo and Soutar, 2012; Chang et al., 2013; Casidy, 2014; Manohar, 2018).

Consumers use the concept of country-of-origin (COO) as a hint about the product/brand (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). CI is defined as the consumer's recognition of the COO and the level of perception of the quality of a particular service (Lin and Chen, 2006). The motivation of the current study fits this description. In the literature, attempts have been made to explain studies on the COO or CI utilising different theoretical underpinnings (Han, 1989; Lee et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). It is also seen that CI is considered as a macro and micro (Chee et al., 2016) or simply a latent variable (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016). While previous studies have considered CI to be a dependent variable, current studies have also examined CI as an independent variable. In other words, while CI is a structure that includes consumer perceptions of products, nowadays the effect of product/brand image on CI is discussed. For example, Woo (2019) examined the relationship between brand image and CI of three Asian countries. It has been determined that if the brand image cannot be maintained successfully, it will negatively affect the overall CI, creating a domino effect. Lee et al. (2016) stated that product beliefs can affect the CI; this effect may be outside conscious awareness. The role of consciousness in consumer purchasing decisions may differ according to the consumer's product experience and the nature of the situation encountered (Ozkara and Bagozzi, 2021). The level of development of the COO, which has a strong relationship with perceived quality, and the evaluation of the products are closely related (Verlegh and Steenkamp,

1999). There are also differences in macro and micro CI dimensions. For example, Lascu et al. (2020) compared the USA, China and Malaysia in terms of macro and micro CI dimensions, finding significant differences therein. In addition, it has been stated that there are differences in the perceptions of the students in terms of the university image, reputation, quality and brand value when it comes to the domestic and international branch campuses of developed and developing countries respectively (Chee et al., 2016). All these differences reveal the necessity of evaluating CI studies within the dynamics of the countries (developed, developing, cultural values between countries, etc.).

In general, WOM and image studies focus on brand, institution and destination factors. Studies that determine the relationship between CI and WOM are limited (Xiao et al., 2016). One may observe that CI studies are carried out for products. However, CI also positively affects consumers' evaluations of intangible services (Cheng et al., 2014). Recently, studies on CI and service quality, especially in the HE sector, have drawn attention. There is a positive relationship between CI and perceived HE quality (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016). The existing studies have found that CI positively affects service quality, which can affect the current image perceptions of countries both economically and culturally. In this context, it is known that service quality is positively related to corporate image (Srivastava and Sharma, 2013). This relationship was confirmed in HE (Sultan and Wong, 2019; Ali et al., 2016).

Countries can offer educational services in different countries for reasons such as having a branch campus, sponsorship and partnership. Therefore, the current study evaluated the relationship between service quality and CI in HE from a different perspective. The findings obtained in this study have shown that the quality of education services of a country that provides education services outside of its own country affects students'

WOM. It has also revealed that CI partially mediates this effect. As mentioned above, although the effects of consumers' product/brand evaluations on CI have recently received attention, there is uncertainty and little information available about the effects and results of service evaluations in HE on CI. Therefore, the current study can provide insight for future research and help to resolve this uncertainty.

5.2. Practical implications

The findings obtained in this study have implications for the education service sector and for countries providing education services outside their own borders. The results suggest that PESQ has a positive direct effect on students' WOM. Service quality is of vital importance in HEIs, where students are the most fundamental assets. This concept can be a driving force for factors such as satisfaction, loyalty and WOM, which are the basic concepts of the marketing discipline. The academic staff of the country that provides education should consist of people who are professionally sensitive, easily accessible to students and fair. If this is achieved, students will be more likely to view the institution and country concerned positively, because while WOM is a powerful source of information for consumers, it is also considered a powerful tool for non-profit organisations (Lang and Lawson, 2013). The service quality perceived by the students has a positive effect on their behavioural tendencies (Hwang and Choi, 2019). However, perceptions of service quality by students in HEIs are not limited to physical facilities. Relational aspects of academic staff also play an essential role in shaping service quality (Datta and Vardhan, 2017). For example, the trainer's attitude, interest and communication shape service quality (El Alfy, 2021). One of the most important empirical results of this study, unlike previous studies, is the effect of PESQ on the CI. This is because countries have a cer-

tain image related to both their historical and cultural ties and their economic level. The important thing is to improve the existing image by means of quality products or services and ensure sustainability. Thus, knowing the mediator role of CI in the effect of PESQ on WOM will contribute to practitioners. The relationship between PESQ and CI in HE can help both country policymakers and HE administrators to position their services more effectively and develop appropriate service strategies that support CI. These can result in a positive WOM for both the country and the institution. Only one department of a public higher education institution in Central Asia was included in the research. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalising the findings. However, it would not be wrong to say that consideration of the factors mentioned in this study would also be beneficial.

Limitations and future directions

This study was conducted in the foreign languages school of a state university for students who learn only the Turkish language. It did not cover the entire university due to constraints on the scope of the research. It would be useful to conduct future studies in different countries, including private HEIs. The model can be tested comparatively, especially through a comparison of scholarship recipients and self-financed students. Thus, similar studies can be conducted with quantitative and qualitative designs in future studies. A basic model was chosen to measure the three conceptual constructs mentioned in this study. Therefore, the CI was measured with a variable. It can be measured separately as micro and macro according to the dynamics of the country where the application is carried out. Different approaches can be adopted with a larger sample. All these recommendations will be useful for generalising, conceptualising and operationalising the model proposed in the current study.

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