

Preferred Quality Attributes of Child Daycare-Center and Their Influences on Word-Of-Mouth Promotion by Parents: Testing the Moderating Effects of Gender

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Abstract

Word of mouth (WOM) is a credible promotional tool, particularly for credence-based services. Day care centers represent an emerging service in most developing nations and remain an under-researched area. This study proposes a seven-dimensional, 34-item, statistically valid and reliable model that captures the quality attributes influencing WOM promotion in day care centers. Data were collected through a questionnaire and analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results revealed that attributes such as ‘security’ and ‘staff credentials’ are top priorities for parents. Furthermore, significant differences between men and women regarding the degree of WOM promotion for day care centers were identified. The findings can guide both existing and prospective day care center owners in designing and modifying their service attributes to encourage positive WOM promotion by parents. Additionally, the outcomes of this study may assist the relevant ministry in preparing policy guidelines for the day care service industry in developing nations.


Keywords: Child Day Care Center, Word Of Mouth Promotion, Multidimensional Modeling, Developing Country.

I. Introduction

As a promotional tool, word of mouth (WOM) has always been influential in finalizing purchase decisions (Leon & Choi, 2020; Arora et al., 2021; Lang & Hyde, 2013). This is predominantly due to its informal, non-commercial, and independent nature, free from corporate influence (Bujisic et al., 2014). In a service context, WOM can be more reliable and value-adding in the decision-making process, since consumers typically cannot evaluate a service prior to availing it (Naylor, 2016). This is primarily due to the intangible characteristics of most services. Previous studies indicate that WOM communication may influence around 50% of purchase decisions in the service sector (Bughin et al., 2018) and exerts more impact than typical advertising (Jalilvand et al., 2017).


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Considering these facts, numerous studies have tested the effects of WOM across multiple service industries, including health insurance (Leon & Choi, 2020), health care services (Martin, 2016), upscale restaurants (Jalilvand et al., 2017), political marketing (Chowdhury & Naheed, 2018), online business (Baber et al., 2016), and the hospitality industry (Muzamil et al., 2018).

For this particular study, the focus is on child daycare services, which are high-involvement services requiring significant evaluations from potential customers given their critical nature. For parents, a high-quality child daycare directly impacts their children's future. In most developing nations, this service is still new and informal, albeit with substantial potential. According to *The Business* (2019), the child daycare industry was projected to reach a market size of USD 520.4 billion in 2022, with significant growth potential in developing countries. Bangladesh, as a developing country, has witnessed a notable transformation in family and labor force structures in recent years, with women's participation in the labor force increasing substantially. Since women are the primary caregivers for children and their participation in the workforce continues to grow, it is assumed that there will be significant demand for quality and affordable child daycare centers in Bangladesh (International Finance Corporation, 2019). However, there is neither any formal policy or guideline from the government for this industry, nor any study identifying the quality attributes of child daycare services preferred by young parents in Bangladesh.

Although the effectiveness of WOM in service selection has been explored in various service sectors, research examining the impact of different quality attributes of child daycare centers on WOM promotion from a developing country perspective remains limited (Degotardi et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a scarcity of recent studies, both in developing and developed nations, that investigate the relationship between quality attributes and their effect on WOM promotion in this industry (with the exception of Kim & Smith, 2007, though this study is now outdated). This gap is critical, as emphasized by Davidow (2014). Furthermore, since child daycare centers are likely to be chosen jointly by both parents, understanding gender-based differences in the propensity to engage in WOM promotion represents another underexplored area within this service context.

The aim of this study is to address both gaps by answering the following research questions:

1. Which child daycare service attributes are closely associated with WOM promotion in Bangladesh?
2. Does gender have any impact on WOM promotion for this credence service?

The findings of this study can determine whether there are differences in the propensity to engage in WOM promotion regarding certain quality attributes between the two genders. In other words, we will address and important under-researched area, are males and females likely to spread WOM about similar attributes, or do they emphasize different attributes? Daycare center owners can then segment their offerings and promotional activities to meet the specific needs of each demographic group. As both parents are involved in the decision-making process of selecting a child daycare center, investigating and incorporating the differences in WOM behavior between mothers and fathers into a center's marketing strategy will add value. Given the nascent stage of the industry, particularly in developing countries, establishing a list of quality attributes would help future daycare center owners prepare their offerings in a market-oriented manner.

II. Literature Review

WOM is described as "oral, person-to-person communication" between a receiver and a communicator, in which the communicator is perceived as noncommercial regarding a brand, product, or service (Mohtasham et al., 2017). Over time, it has grown in importance and influence as a source of information on customer sentiments and purchasing patterns (Curtis et al., 2011). Both positive and negative evaluations of service encounters can be transmitted through WOM (Lang & Hyde, 2013). In the field of relationship marketing, WOM may be beneficial for both customer acquisition and retention, since customers who spread positive WOM messages are more likely to become loyal customers themselves (Lang & Hyde, 2013).

From the customer perspective, WOM provides several benefits. First, it enables access to "trusted advisors" and filtered information without the burden of navigating information overload. This saves time by clarifying what to look for and allowing consumers to benefit from the experiences of others (Alire, 2007). Second, by reducing the perceived risk associated with particular purchasing behaviors, WOM empowers customers to make better decisions. Since only 14% of people report believing in advertising, Alire (2007) argued that WOM is a more credible marketing strategy than other approaches because consumers are more likely to trust recommendations from friends, family, and colleagues, who have no personal stake in the product or service being promoted. WOM also carries the advantage of creating a snowball effect, thereby amplifying the total reach of the message (Pruden & Vavra, 2015). Hence, businesses need to capitalize on this opportunity due to its significant organizational potential.

First-time service users are more likely to encounter uncertainty, as consumers tend to associate higher perceived risk with services that involve substantial experience and credence qualities (Wirtz et al., 2017). The influence of WOM is particularly strong for services that emphasize credibility and experience, or for products where acquisition is closely associated with perceived risk (Leon & Choi, 2020). Consumers also use the Internet to

research independent reviews and ratings, compare alternatives, and participate in social media discussions. Since the rise of social media, consumer behavior regarding WOM has evolved as information is increasingly shared on open platforms (Naylor, 2016). This has further amplified the significance of WOM.

Scholars have conducted several studies exploring child daycare attributes preferred in developed nations. Among the most notable findings, price has emerged as one of the most significant variables for many parents across the globe, as observed in New Zealand (Meissel et al., 2019), Australia (Degotardi et al., 2018), India (Ghosh & Dey, 2020), and the United States (Kim et al., 2016). A study conducted in Australia revealed that convenient location, affordability, school ratings, and quality of care are crucial daycare factors (Degotardi et al., 2018). Another study on Australia emphasized that parents prefer smaller group sizes, proper education and training of caregivers, and a curriculum that supports cognitive development as key decision-making factors.

In Canada, location, learning programs, business hours, security, trust in caregivers, affordability, and recommendations from friends and family are decisive aspects (Sinha, 2014). Some parents also firmly believe that sending children to daycare aids in cognitive development (e.g., recognizing colors and shapes), while extracurricular activities such as singing and dancing better prepare children for formal schooling (Rana & Sen, 2008).

For American parents, important features include location, child development programs, recommendations from others, availability of food, after-hours services, and cost (Kim et al., 2016); quality of the center and caregivers, emphasis on self-respect and respect for others, and parents' involvement in decision-making (Burchinal et al., 2014); as well as familiarity with caregivers, regulatory frameworks, child safety, and available activities (Shlay et al., 2007). In Malaysia, perceived service quality was identified as the most important daycare characteristic for parents (Omar et al., 2009). For parents in India, staff education, proximity to home, safety around the center, and play areas are vital determinants (Ghosh & Dey, 2020).

In South Africa, children's social and emotional well-being, holistic development, foundations for values and respect, and parental involvement in decision-making are major criteria for daycare selection (Van Heerden, 2016). In Germany, availability and flexible hours of operation are important features (Kreyenfeld, 2000), while in Italy, price, communication with parents, staff professionalism, transport facilities, and the availability of various developmental programs are key considerations (Del Boca et al., 2005).

The significance and impact of WOM have long been recognized by both academicians and practitioners (Iyer & Griffin, 2021). Since the first five years of a child's life are associated with numerous benefits, including improved employment productivity, reduced crime rates, and increased educational attainment, childcare services are essential. Consequently, the manner in which this crucial consumer service is provided and executed affects both the service users (children) and its direct clients (parents). Given the high credibility value of childcare, assessing soft service quality features such as attentiveness, helpfulness, care, friendliness, communication, commitment, and civility is particularly challenging in this sector (Huff & Cotte, 2013).

Service firms often strive to satisfy their customers by offering choices and options in their services (Leon & Choi, 2020). However, studies show that when searching for childcare, parents are frequently left with limited choices due to the complexity of the decision. Many times, parents must decide between what they consider ideal and what is practically feasible. As a result, they often engage in lengthy search processes, which include extensive WOM communication and the use of Internet resources, before making a decision (Huff & Cotte, 2013).

Murray (1991) found that personal sources of information ranked much higher in the case of childcare services than advertisements or government accreditations. This finding was further validated by Grace and O'Cass (2003), who reported that parents rated listening to others and visiting centers as their main activities when searching for a new childcare center. However, it is important to note that mere satisfaction does not necessarily lead individuals to engage in WOM promotion. Customers generally want to be perceived as credible sources of information, particularly within their reference groups, and thus base their referrals on a continuous and satisfactory relationship with the childcare center. These findings imply that positive WOM can prove to be extremely beneficial for this service sector.

One of the contrasting factors among individuals is gender. Differences in hormones and brain structures are primary causes of the distinct behaviors and thought processes observed between men and women. Sun and Qu (2011a) revealed that men and women behave differently when making decisions because of the differing roles they play in society. Similarly, purchase choice, evaluation, and degree of WOM promotion vary considerably between genders (Lang & Hyde, 2013). Women generally lean toward emotions that emphasize peace, connection, and self-improvement, as well as concern for others (Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2010). They also tend to rely on interpersonal cues provided by employees (Noble et al., 2006). Sun and Qu (2011b) argued that relational service quality has more influence on women than on men, whereas core service quality has greater impact on men than on women.

Research further indicates that gender differences are evident with respect to knowledge sharing (Chai et al., 2011). An empirical study by Mansour and Farmanesh (2020) revealed that susceptibility to WOM is stronger among women than among men. Chai et al. (2011) also concluded that women are more likely to share their opinions about a product or service on online platforms when they trust the information source and the information

itself. In terms of online consumer reviews, women are more convinced by positive reviews of a product or service than men (Bae & Lee, 2010).

Garg et al. (2014) found gender differences in banking services; for example, females exert greater WOM influence on banks' servicescapes, aesthetics, convenience, and service delivery processes compared to males. Women also tend to have stronger WOM influence regarding apparel when making online purchase decisions (Fitriandri et al., 2021). Similarly, Keech et al. (2020) explored gender-based differences in materialism, power, risk aversion, self-consciousness, and social comparison. Gender differences in WOM were also identified by Melnyk and Van Osselaer (2012), who found that women are more heavily influenced by shopping enjoyment and promotional offers than men. The moderating role of gender in WOM communication was further established by Ma et al. (2014) in the restaurant context and by Khan and Rehman (2017) in financial services.

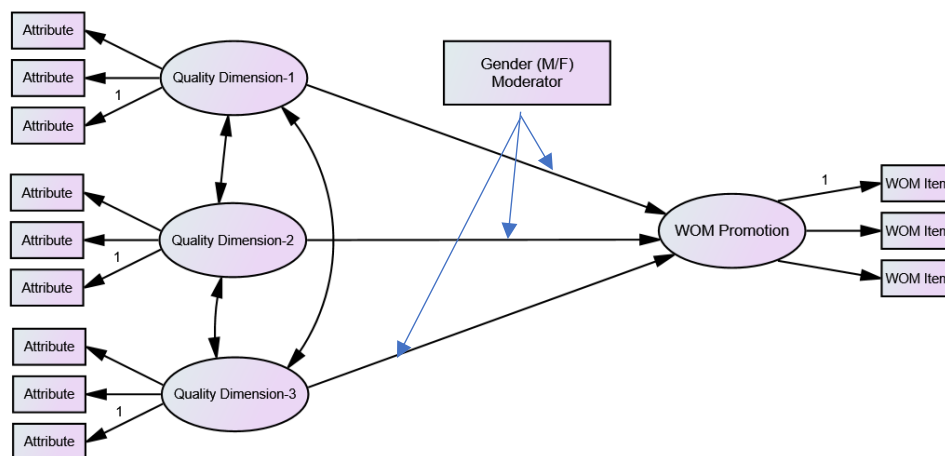
Comparable results were reported by Wang et al. (2016), who found that female tourists are more influenced by WOM than male tourists when forming perceptions of a destination's image. Meyers-Levy and Zhu (2010) also examined gender differences in WOM influence and concluded that men tend to be less persuaded by referrals, as such behavior conflicts with masculine gender stereotypes. An analysis of consumers of popular coffee chains revealed that women are more likely to advise others regarding price value, while men recommend revisits based on perceived brand value (Choi et al., 2017). Wang et al. (2017) proposed that women are more strongly influenced by WOM regarding the perceived quality of vacation spots compared to men. Similarly, Kempf and Palan (2006) found that WOM has a greater influence on women than on men.

Studies have also shown that men and women tend to engage in WOM about different topics. For example, men are more likely to spread WOM about vehicles, financial services, computers, and politics, whereas women actively recommend personal care, over-the-counter medications, nutrition, and health care (Allsop et al., 2007), as well as hotels, restaurants, marketing, and retail (Krishnaillai & Ying, 2017; Yang, 2017). Based on the existing literature on gender and WOM, it is expected that WOM promotion for child daycare services will also differ between men and women. Therefore, the model developed in this study aims to explore whether such differences exist in WOM promotion for child daycare service components with respect to gender, and to what extent choice attributes and dimensions influence WOM.

This study proposes that, due to the nature of daycare services which rely heavily on credence attributes daycare centers should prioritize WOM communication and promotional strategies to convince parents to adopt such services. The underlying argument is that parents are likely to engage in WOM promotion if they are influenced by the quality attributes of child daycare services. As previous studies have established that gender is an important factor influencing WOM promotion, it becomes essential to measure the degree of involvement of both males and females in this context.

While Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model, it is important to empirically: (a) explore the variables and dimensions of child daycare services that influence WOM promotion; (b) test and confirm that child daycare service components have a significant impact on WOM promotion; and (c) validate the differences in the degree of WOM promotion between men and women with respect to child daycare services.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Study



Note: Author's own work

III. Methodology

To gather a list of preferred child daycare service attributes from different countries, relevant published journals, articles, newspaper clippings, and book chapters from 2000 to 2023 were reviewed. Additionally, related keywords such as *child daycare variables*, *important criteria for selecting child daycare centers*, and *child daycare service attributes in developed, developing, and South Asian countries* were used to search Google Scholar and Scopus databases. As one of the objectives of this study was to identify criteria preferred by parents in a developing country such as Bangladesh when choosing and recommending daycare centers, the authors developed a new index customized to parental preferences in this context (a country-specific customization approach was similarly applied by Davidson et al., 2022; Ghosh & Dey, 2020). To refine the list of selection criteria for the Bangladeshi context, a three-step process was applied, resulting in 56 variables.

First, keeping in mind the objectives of this study and Bangladesh as the case context, a five-member committee was appointed to finalize the initial list of variables. Three committee members were proficient in service marketing, one was an expert in psychology, and one specialized in quality assurance. Indicators receiving at least three out of five votes were retained (a similar approach was used by Chowdhury & Naheed, 2019; Hossain et al., 2018; Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Based on the experts' suggestions, nine indicators were dropped (e.g., distributing daycare leaflets in neighborhoods, caregivers being personally known to parents, and caregiver turnover rate), and three were rephrased. Second, owners of three prominent daycare centers in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, were invited to discuss the refined list of 47 variables (similar methods were followed by Lopez-Lemus, 2024; Chowdhury & Naheed, 2019; Hossain et al., 2018). They unanimously agreed to remove four variables, professional qualifications of caregivers, stand-by ambulance services, quality of furniture, and flexible hours of operation and suggested adding a new item: the presence of air purifiers in rooms, due to growing concerns about the Air Quality Index.

Finally, using a five-point Likert scale as recommended by the experts, a questionnaire containing 44 approved items and eight WOM-related questions was pilot-tested among 100 parents of young children. The objectives of the pilot study were to assess the suitability of the questionnaire's language and identify potential refinements (particularly the addition of new items). Respondents did not recommend any changes; thus, the approved indicators and WOM-related questions were finalized for data collection through a face-to-face survey.

A simple random sampling technique with a 1:10 data sample ratio was applied to collect the data. Trained surveyors gathered responses from various areas of Dhaka, targeting individuals from middle- to high-income groups (as these groups are more likely to possess the understanding, willingness, experience, and affordability required for child daycare services).

The survey instrument began with an introduction to the study's objectives and a consent section highlighting participants' rights. The next section included demographic questions such as gender, educational qualification, age, family monthly income, and profession. The third section asked respondents to rate their opinions regarding decision-making criteria such as the reputation of the center, consistency in service delivery, presence of social development and play-based programs, emphasis on communication and skill-building, bullying- and discrimination-free environment, admission fees and payment options, distance from home and workplace, transportation services, recommendations from others, promotional campaigns (including informative websites and Facebook pages), caregivers' academic qualifications, hygiene awareness of caregivers, communication style between teachers and parents, physical layout of the center, internal and external security, safety issues, and parental involvement in decision-making—using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = *not important at all* and 5 = *most important*. These decision-making criteria are presented in Column 1 of Table 2. The final section consisted of WOM-related questions, asking whether respondents would share their views about sincerity, cleanliness, safety, security, and teachers' communication style, and whether they would share positive aspects of the centers on social media or personal blogs.

A first dataset of 601 usable responses (51.5% of the total sample) was collected from female respondents across different areas of Dhaka to develop the multidimensional respondent requirement model. A second dataset containing responses from 565 male respondents from the same city was also collected, as suggested by Malhotra and Dash (2019), to confirm the results of the first dataset. In total, 1,166 responses were gathered. Data were collected from two categories of parents: (1) those who had been sending their children to daycare centers for at least one year, allowing for more in-depth information about the centers, and (2) those actively seeking immediate admission for their children. Only parents using or intending to use privately owned daycare centers were surveyed. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

For statistical computation, structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to develop the model, given its superior capacity and accuracy in multidimensional model development compared to other multivariate techniques such as regression. To develop, validate, and propose a new WOM promotion model for child daycare centers, the authors followed well-established scale/index development processes suggested by Lopez-Lemus (2024), Byrne (2021), Collier (2020), Malhotra and Dash (2019), and Hossain et al. (2018).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic Features	Female		Male	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	601	51.54	565	48.45
Educational Qualification				
SSC/O-Level passed	5	0.4	2	0.1
HSC/A-level passed	64	5	82	7
Graduate	251	21.52	229	19.63
Post graduate	276	23.67	236	20.24
Doctoral degree	10	0.8	21	1.8
Age (in year) of the respondent				
18-<25	136	11.66	134	11.49
25-<35	323	27.70	289	24.78
35-<45	129	11.06	120	10.29
45+	13	1.11	22	1.88
Occupations				
Student	110	9.43	102	8.74
Government services	37	3.17	41	3.51
Private jobs	334	28.64	345	29.58
Business	26	2.22	57	4.88
Self-employed	30	2.57	18	1.54
Home maker	64	5.48	2	0.17

Note: Author's own work

Results: Development Of WOM Promotion Model For Child Daycare Center

The process began with an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which identifies the most relevant variables as well as underlying dimensions based on respondents' opinions (Hair et al., 2016). Responses from male participants (N = 565) were utilized to conduct the EFA. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value, which indicates sample adequacy, was 0.91, confirming that the dataset was suitable for exploratory analysis. The 10:1 rule for data per attribute (565 responses for 52 variables) was also satisfied (Byrne, 2021). The initial EFA results revealed that the 52 items were grouped under nine constructs, with a total variance explained (TVE) of 70.22%. Following prior studies, only attributes with factor loadings and communality values greater than 0.50 and without cross-loadings were retained (Chowdhury & Naheed, 2019; Byrne, 2021). Based on these criteria, six items (e.g., year of establishment, consistency in service delivery, and use of ID cards) were dropped in the first round. The process was repeated iteratively until all remaining items met the retention criteria. The final EFA produced 37 items grouped under seven dimensions.

Next, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to test the acceptability of the indicators grouped under each construct. For CFA, responses from female participants (N = 601) were utilized, as recommended by Malhotra and Dash (2019) to use a second dataset. Items with factor loadings greater than 0.50 and constructs with Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) > 0.80, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) > 0.85, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) < 0.05, and Hoelter's N > 200 were retained (Byrne, 2021; Hossain et al., 2018). Based on these criteria, two additional items were discarded. The remaining 35 items across seven dimensions were then tested through the measurement model, which examined the extent to which all retained dimensions and their underlying items fit together as a single model. For this comprehensive model, GFI, CFI, RMSEA, and Hoelter's values were 0.90, 0.92, 0.047, and 321/351, respectively, indicating a satisfactory model fit (Byrne, 2021).

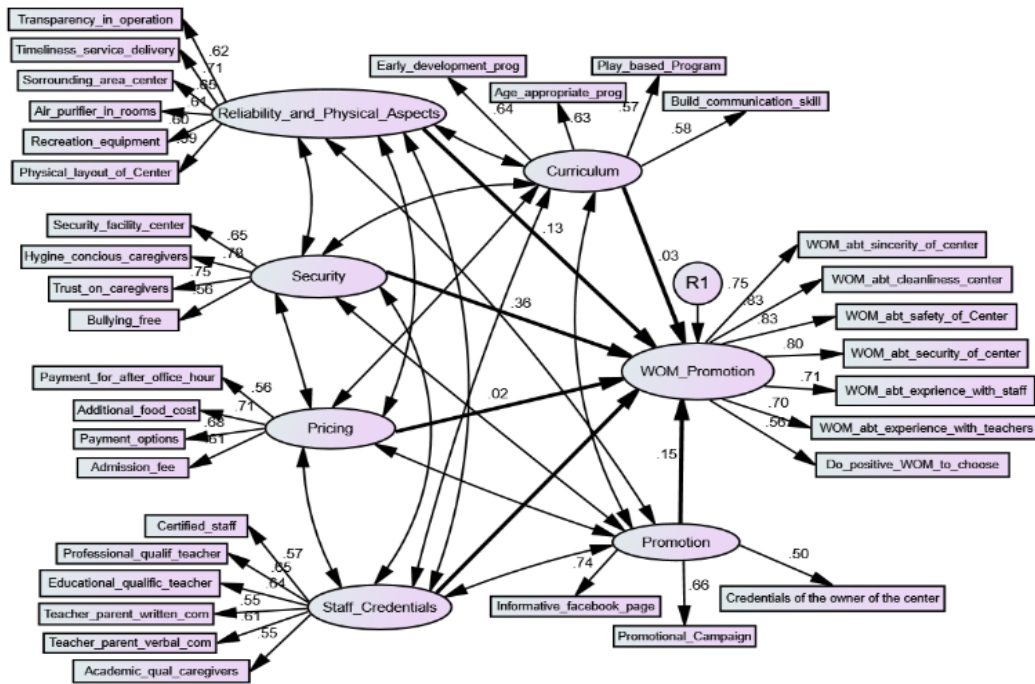
One of the dimensions included items such as admission fee, additional food costs, and payment options; therefore, it was named *pricing*. Another dimension comprising play-based programs, early development programs, and age-appropriate programs was named *curriculum*. Items related to sincerity, cleanliness, safety, and security of the center in WOM promotion formed a dimension named *WOM promotion*. Following the same procedure, the other dimensions were labeled *security*, *reliability and physical aspects*, *staff credentials*, and *promotion* (see Table 2). Finally, the structural model was developed with *WOM promotion* as the dependent construct and the remaining six dimensions as independent constructs (see the one-way arrows from the six dimensions to *WOM promotion* in Figure 2). At this stage, one item—"I will share positive aspects of the center on social media"—was dropped due to low factor loading. The final results indicated that all 34 remaining items had loadings greater than 0.50 (see Table 2), with acceptable GFI, CFI, RMSEA, and Hoelter's values of 0.92, 0.94, 0.047, and 327/359, respectively.

Table 2. Loadings And Descandtive Statistics of the Study

Indicators	Dimension	Loading	Mean (SD)	AVE/CR
No bullying inside the center	Security Mean 4.68	0.56	4.70 (0.67)	0.52/0.81
Trustworthy caregivers		0.75	4.64 (0.59)	
Caregivers are hygiene conscious		0.77	4.76 (0.57)	
Security inside the center	Reliability and Physical Aspects Mean 4.30	0.65	4.77 (0.61)	0.50/0.79
Physical layout inside the institute		0.59	4.09 (0.86)	
Recreational equipment		0.59	4.39 (0.62)	
Using Air purifiers inside the rooms		0.62	4.31 (0.80)	
Surrounding area		0.65	4.06 (0.74)	
Timeliness in delivering services	Staff Credentials Mean 4.35	0.70	4.32 (0.67)	0.49/0.78
Transparent operations		0.62	4.53 (0.69)	
Caregivers' academic qualifications		0.55	4.13 (0.92)	
Teacher and parents verbal communication		0.61	4.56 (0.62)	
Teacher to parents written communication		0.54	4.23 (0.82)	
Teachers' Educational qualifications	Pricing Mean 3.62	0.63	4.51 (0.69)	0.53/0.82
Teachers' professional qualifications		0.64	4.49 (0.68)	
Certified staffs in the center		0.56	4.16 (0.79)	
Admission fee		0.61	3.91 (0.82)	
Availability of different payment options		0.68	3.92 (1.02)	
Additional cost for food	Curriculum Mean 4.34	0.71	3.46 (1.03)	0.47/0.72
Payment option for after-office hours services		0.56	3.62 (0.99)	
Having early development programs		0.64	4.22 (0.79)	
Offering of age-appropriate program		0.63	4.36 (0.69)	
Having play-based program		0.57	4.40 (0.62)	
Building communication skills of child	Promotion Mean 3.82	0.57	4.52 (0.66)	0.49/0.69
Credential of the owners		0.50	4.33 (0.79)	
Type of Promotional campaign of the center		0.66	3.69 (0.97)	
Presence of informative Facebook page		0.74	3.83 (0.98)	
I talk about the sincerity of the center		0.75	4.14 (0.81)	
I talk about the cleanliness of the center	WOM Promotion Mean 4.22	0.82	4.29 (0.80)	0.61/0.89
I talk about the safety of the center		0.83	4.41 (0.77)	
I talk about the security of the center		0.80	4.42 (0.77)	
I talk about my experience with the staff		0.71	4.19 (0.83)	
I talk about my experience with the teachers		0.70	4.22 (0.81)	
I do positive WOM to choose this center		0.55	3.89 (1.02)	

Note: Author's own work

Figure 2. WOM Promotion Model for Child Daycare Centers



Note: Author’s own work

The Cronbach’s alpha value, which indicates the degree of internal consistency and reliability of the model, was 0.90. This result suggests that the proposed model demonstrates high reliability (Chowdhury & Naheed, 2019). Model reliability was further confirmed through construct reliability (CR) values (reported in Table 2), all of which exceeded the threshold of 0.60 for each dimension, thereby establishing internal consistency (Cho, 2016). Convergent and discriminant validity of the model were also assessed. The average variance extracted (AVE) value for each dimension was greater than 0.50 (Table 2), indicating convergent validity. In addition, the square root of AVE (diagonal values in Table 3) for each construct was higher than its correlations with other constructs (off-diagonal values), confirming discriminant validity.

As the chi-square/df value was 2.43 below the recommended threshold of 3.00 the developed model is considered robust (Hair et al., 2016). Furthermore, the low RMSEA value (0.047) provides evidence that the degree of error in the proposed model is minimal. The final seven-dimensional, 34-item, statistically significant WOM promotion model for child daycare centers in Bangladesh is presented in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 3. Testing Discriminant Validity

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Security	0.72						
2. Reliability and Physical Aspects	0.33	0.70					
3. Staff Credentials	0.27	0.32	0.70				
4. Pricing	0.18	0.21	0.34	0.71			
5. Curriculum	0.31	0.28	0.29	0.24	0.68		
6. Promotion	0.27	0.19	0.11	0.17	0.29	0.71	
7. WOM Promotions	0.22	0.18	0.19	0.28	0.15	0.20	0.78

IV. Discussion and Implications

Among the six dimensions, *security* ranked the highest, with a mean of 4.68 out of 5.00 (see Table 2). The indicator most valued by parents was “security facilities inside the center” (M = 4.77), followed by “hygiene consciousness of the caregivers” (M = 4.76), “bullying-free environment” (M = 4.70), and “trust in caregivers” (M = 4.64). These findings indicate that for parents, security within the center is the most important factor. Security encompasses both physical safety, including facilities and hygiene consciousness, and emotional safety, such as parents’ trust

in caregivers (providing mental assurance) and a bully-free environment that allows children to flourish emotionally.

Staff credentials and communication ranked second as a dimension ($M = 4.35$). The most important indicator was “teacher and parent verbal communication” ($M = 4.56$), followed by “teachers’ educational qualifications” ($M = 4.51$), “teachers’ professional qualifications” ($M = 4.49$), and “teacher-to-parent written communication” ($M = 4.23$). These results suggest that parents place considerable emphasis on teachers, prioritizing both their qualifications and their capacity for verbal communication with parents. The last two indicators in this dimension were “certified staff at the center” and “educational qualifications of staff members.” This finding is particularly important for future daycare centers because, as the industry is still in its nascent stage, professional training opportunities for this specialized service remain limited. The results highlight this gap as an area the industry needs to address.

The third-ranked dimension was *curriculum* ($M = 4.34$). Given that daycare centers rely heavily on credence attributes, it is understandable that parents evaluate the service primarily based on its core elements. The most important attribute within this dimension was “building communication skills of the child” ($M = 4.52$), followed by “play-based programs,” “age-appropriate programs,” and “early development programs.” Since childcare services significantly influence the first five years of a child’s life, and as children not parents are the direct recipients of the service, parents’ evaluations are often shaped by their children’s feedback. As such, parents attach strong importance to the development of their children’s communication skills. Furthermore, because these formative years shape children’s personalities and daycare centers accept children of different age groups, play-based and age-appropriate programs are also valued highly by parents.

Reliability and physical layout of the center ranked fourth ($M = 4.30$). Within this dimension, “transparent operations” ranked highest ($M = 4.53$), which reflects the challenge of assessing service quality in credence-based services. Transparency in operations can provide reassurance and build trust in the service. This finding aligns with Grace and O’Cass (2003), who reported that ethics in operations ranked highest among choice variables. The second most important indicator in this dimension was “recreational equipment” ($M = 4.39$), as parents who leave their children for prolonged periods prefer them to be engaged productively. “Timeliness in service delivery” was also emphasized, which is understandable given that daycare centers cater to working parents who face time pressures. “Air purifiers” emerged as another important attribute, likely due to heightened awareness of air quality following the pandemic. Overall, the physical layout of a daycare center serves three functions: it attracts potential customers, conveys a message about service quality, and influences the moods of both parents and children.

The *surrounding area* dimension ranked fifth ($M = 4.06$). The neighborhood in which the center is located plays an important role because, given the limited availability of daycare centers in Bangladesh, parents may not always have convenient location choices. However, the surrounding area directly impacts safety perceptions. Parents may feel uneasy leaving children in centers located in overly quiet or remote neighborhoods, while excessively crowded areas may create commuting challenges.

Promotion ranked next, with an average mean of 3.82. Within this dimension, “credentials of the owners” was the highest-ranked attribute ($M = 4.33$), which is expected in a service characterized by credence attributes. Parents are more likely to discuss and recommend daycare centers if they can rely on the credibility of the owners. By contrast, attributes such as “Facebook pages” ($M = 3.83$) and “paid promotional campaigns” ($M = 3.69$) had relatively low impact on parents. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that WOM is more credible than other marketing techniques; while only 14% of people trust advertising, nearly 90% trust recommendations from family, friends, or colleagues, who are perceived to be unbiased sources (Alire, 2007).

The lowest-ranked dimension was *pricing* ($M = 3.62$). Among pricing attributes, the “availability of different payment options” ranked highest ($M = 3.92$), closely followed by “admission fees” ($M = 3.91$). “Payment options for after-office hours services” ($M = 3.62$) and “additional cost of food” ($M = 3.46$) ranked lower. These results suggest that parents are more focused on core payment factors, particularly admission fees, while also valuing the flexibility of having multiple payment methods, such as cash, credit card, online transfers, direct bank transfers, and mobile money. Given that working parents are often time-constrained, having diverse payment options provides convenience and flexibility. Interestingly, payment options were considered more important than the admission fees themselves. By contrast, additional charges for food and after-hour services were less important due to their optional nature, though parents noted that under exceptional circumstances, these services could add value.

Table 4. Influence of Different Choice Dimensions on WOM Promotion

Relation Between Dimensions	Loadings	Significance
Security to WOM Promotion	0.356	0.000
Reliability and Physical Aspects to WOM Promotion	0.132	0.042
Staff Credentials to WOM Promotion	0.160	0.012
Pricing to WOM Promotion	0.021	0.007
Curriculum to WOM Promotion	0.035	0.003
Promotion to WOM Promotion	0.146	0.002

Note: Author's own work

Since this research focuses on WOM, we examined the relationship of WOM (as the dependent variable) with the other dimensions (independent variables). The findings show that *security* has the highest loading (0.356), while *pricing* has the lowest (0.021). This implies that 35% of WOM promotion regarding daycare centers is likely to be based on security-related criteria. The next three dimensions generating similar levels of WOM are *staff credentials* (16%), *promotion* (14.6%), and *reliability and physical aspects* (13.2%). *Pricing* ranked the lowest (2.1%), indicating that parents are less likely to spread WOM concerning cost-related issues. These findings may be attributed to the fact that daycare centers are still at a nascent stage of development in urban Bangladesh. Consequently, having a safe option for leaving children is the attribute parents are most likely to discuss.

Moderating Effects of Gender on WOM Promotion

A two-group analysis (male and female) was performed to estimate the moderating effect of gender on WOM promotion in child daycare centers. The results (Table 5) show that, as all chi-square differences exceed 3.84, the outcomes are statistically significant, confirming differences between men and women regarding the degree of WOM promotion in the context of daycare centers.

Table 5. Moderation Effect Results

Independent dimensions	Dependent dimension	Path coefficient		Chi-square		Chi-square difference
		Female	Male	Unconstrained	Constrained	
Security		0.51	0.43	2966.18	3001.28	35.1
Reliability and Physical Assets		0.72	0.61	2966.18	3011.29	45.11
Staff Credentials	WOM Promotion	0.43	0.56	2966.18	3009.47	43.29
Pricing		0.81	0.9	2966.18	2998.19	32.01
Curriculum		0.41	0.85	2966.18	2993.89	27.71
Promotion		0.51	0.41	2966.18	3004.72	38.54

Note: Author's own work

Based on the results above, it can be observed that the propensity to engage in WOM regarding the different dimensions varies between genders. Females are more likely to engage in WOM promotion related to security features, reliability and physical assets, and overall promotional efforts of the center. Previous studies have shown that men and women display different behaviors when making decisions, largely due to the societal roles they occupy (Sun & Qu, 2011a). Since women are generally expected to play the role of primary caregiver, they are more inclined to emphasize the reliability and safety of the center, which is reflected in their greater propensity to spread WOM regarding these features.

By contrast, males are more likely to engage in WOM related to pricing, curriculum, and staff credentials. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that males tend to be more rational and are more likely to spread WOM concerning the core features of a service. According to Li and Wang (2018), men are more likely to discuss topics that can be framed as competition, either in visible or invisible formats. Sun et al. (2019) also found that men rely more on heuristics and salient information to reduce time and cost. Thus, their focus on pricing, curriculum, and staff credentials can be explained by the fact that these attributes can be easily compared across alternatives.

This distinction is particularly useful for service providers in this case, daycare centers because in today's context, e-WOM through social platforms is widespread. The use of digital marketing enables companies to target distinct segments and customize messages based on specific preferences. Accordingly, daycare center providers can tailor their communication strategies to emphasize the dimensions most valued by each gender group.

V. Conclusion

This study offers a statistically valid and reliable seven-dimensional, 34-item model that captures the attributes most closely associated with WOM promotion of child daycare centers in developing countries. In addition, the study examined the moderating effects of gender on the degree of WOM promotion for daycare centers.

Dimension-wise results revealed that *security aspects*, followed by *staff credential features*, received the highest priority among parents in Bangladesh. Respondents also placed considerable importance on attributes related to the *reliability* and *physical layout* of the centers. At the attribute level, findings showed that, since parents leave their children behind, security inside the center and the presence of a bullying-free environment were the most influential features. Consistent with these findings, the surrounding area of the center was also deemed crucial. Parents preferred centers located neither in overly crowded areas nor in secluded neighborhoods. In addition, because parents seek academic and intellectual development for their children, teachers' educational and professional qualifications were viewed as critical. Aligned with this result, parents expressed a desire for play-based and other programs that would build their children's communication skills. Interestingly, the pricing of daycare services was of less concern to parents, provided that security and a strong academic environment were ensured.

The study further found significant differences between men and women with respect to the degree of WOM promotion for daycare centers. As mothers are usually the primary caregivers in developing nations, security factors and the reliability of the center were more important to them. Consequently, women tended to promote these aspects more than men. In contrast, men were more inclined to promote issues related to pricing and staff credentials. These findings carry important implications for decision-makers, enabling them to adopt targeted strategies to attract different customer segments.

The current study is based on primary data collected from one developing country Bangladesh. Future researchers could test the applicability of the proposed model in other developing nations. Additionally, a comparative study between developing and developed countries regarding the preferred attributes of daycare centers, as well as gender-based differences in WOM promotion, could be of interest to policymakers and researchers alike.

There are three notable implications of this study: (1) the findings can help entrepreneurs planning to open daycare centers in developing countries design their service offerings in line with parental preferences, thereby encouraging positive WOM; (2) existing centers can revise and improve their offerings according to parents' requirements; and (3) in developing nations, such as Bangladesh, where the concerned ministry has yet to prepare policy guidelines for the daycare industry, the findings of this study may serve as useful benchmarks.

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Competing interest Statement

No funding was received by the researcher while preparing this manuscript. The authors declare that there are no competing interests. Ethics approval number to conduct the human survey: 2019/OR-NSU/IRB-No. 1101.

Author (s) Contribution Statement

Tamgid Ahmed Chowdhury, Zarjina Tarana Khalil, and Shahneela Naheed conceived the idea and design of the study. Tamgid wrote the introduction section, which was subsequently revised by Zarjina. Shahneela and Zarjina prepared the literature review section with assistance from Tamgid. All authors participated in data collection. Shahneela organized the database, and Tamgid Chowdhury performed the statistical analysis. All authors contributed to interpreting the results and Zarjina finalized the discussion section. All authors also participated in manuscript revision, and all read and approved the final submitted version

Data Availability Statement

The data used in the study is available upon request.

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