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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CUSTOMER ORIENTATION ATTITUDE OF SELECTED PRIVATE AND PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA

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Abstract:
The overall objective of the study was to compare the customer orientation attitude of selected private and public Universities in Ghana. Besides, the study also examined the probability of private or public Universities being more customer oriented than the other. The study employed the use of the descriptive design. Data was collected from three private and public Universities in Ghana. The study used standardized questionnaires as the main source of data collection instrument. In terms of the analysis of data, the study employed the use of the statistical package for social sciences version 21. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The findings revealed that that there is a statistically significant difference in the customer orientation behaviour ($t_{(420)}$= -1.049, p>.05) of private universities (M= 6.78, SD= 0.002) and public universities ((M= 7.02, SD= 0.82). Again, the predicted odds that a student from a public university is Exp(B) =0.303, however since the coefficient is (-1.192), that is negative, thus, a student from a public university is 30% less than likely to perceive themselves as customers compared with a student from a private university. Recommendations as well as areas for further study have been presented.

Keywords: customer orientation, private university, public university

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The phenomenon of customer orientation at a higher educational institution (HEI) and marketization of higher education started to gain ground in the beginning of the 1970s, as more radical and progressive positions were taken in education. The emergence of neoliberalism as a new mode governmentality resulted in institutional and workplace changes to allow more freedom necessary for individual, institutional and national

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economic survival (Argenti, 2000). As "*for neoliberals, there is one form of rationality more powerful than any other: economic rationality*" (Apple, 2015, p. 59), and neoliberal techniques involve the commercialization of education (Bailey & Dangerfield, 2000), HEIs found themselves face-to-face with demands for new responsibilities and low cost of entry into the business education sector.

This, in its turn, has resulted in fierce competition, efforts to recruit and retain students as well as pursuit for favorable student ratings and accreditations (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Currently, institutions of higher education all over the world are competing for funds from both public and private sectors as well as from potential students (Bristow & Schneider, 2003). To do so, many HEIs position themselves as value-creators, stressing academic excellence as well as practitioner orientation. However, because value-creation, academic excellence and practitioner orientation have become generic terms, a number of schools, in the hope of attracting more students, claim to be customer-oriented academic institutions where the process of acquiring education is flexible and convenient. Student-customer orientation1 is a key concept for this dissertation and is defined, using Bristow and Schneider (2014), as the degree to which a HEI makes decisions and acts upon the expectations and needs of the students as well as the goals and objectives of the institution (p. 21).

Using Browne (2010), expectations have been defined as "*desires, wants, ideal standards*" (p. 12) and the understanding of those is of substantial essence in order to provide a satisfying service experience (Chonko, Tanner & Davis, 2002). Debate in existing literature on positioning a HEI as a student-customer oriented institution stands polarized. At one extreme there are those who state that when demand is falling, HEIs should focus on the customer (i.e. the students) and remarket the product (i.e. education) (Clayson & Haley, 2005). Others at the other end of the continuum, however, oppose and claim that student-customer orientation does not contribute to professionalism and the worst approach a HEI can take to attract more students is the student-customer orientation approach.

In addition to being polarized, literature is frequently also hostile towards students executing the rights of customers and HEIs putting up with this (Cohen, 1988). The prevailing sentiment in the existing literature is that students no longer take responsibility for their learning, but have rather deferred it to the educators and that they have taken full control of education (Conway, Mackay & Yorke, 1994). Existing literature is also mainly conceptual – of the numerous academic articles published on the topic of student-customer orientation, the author has been able to identify only six empirical studies that have an immediate connection to the phenomenon at hand.

However, a detailed analysis of the existing studies reveals that, even though conclusive in their findings, existing literature may have overgeneralized student's views in several specific areas and the issue may not have been probed at a sufficiently detailed level. The problem of this research constitutes itself in the following: competition in the sector of education is fierce and to differentiate, many HEIs have decided to position themselves as student-customer orientation. Even though student-customer orientation has been studied, the existing instruments and tools fail to gain an in-depth knowledge on whether or not students as the primary beneficiaries of education expect a HEI to be customer oriented (Danneels, 2003). However, this knowledge is of utmost relevance when positioning a HEI as a customer-oriented institution. This problem whether a HEI should be customer oriented has been long debated on in the context of the marketized sector of education and this represents an opportunity for further investigation and insight, thus providing a significant contribution to the existing conceptual and empirical evidence.

Concerning methodological contribution, the dissertation constructs and validates the Student-Customer Orientation Measurement Instrument which can be used in other (comparative) surveys with a similar aim. In terms of practical contribution, the study conducted among undergraduate business students shows whether HEIs offering business education, which have decided to position themselves as customer-oriented institutions, should employ student customer orientation across all or only some categories of educational experience. The aim of this doctoral dissertation is therefore to contribute to the concept of student-customer orientation and to identify, at the detailed level of different educational experiences, whether, in which categories of educational experience and to what extent students expect/do not expect a HEI offering business education to be student-customer oriented.

2. Statement of the Problem

While some studies have shown that private universities provide better quality education than public universities, there are some disadvantages of private universities, including the high cost of attendance and lack of consistent regulatory practices (Melbourne, 2018). Also, it remains to be determined whether or not students are actually more satisfied with the overall quality at these two private universities in Ghana or just with some aspects that are contributing factors to quality. Private universities are expected to take initiatives to provide a higher quality education by implementing best practices in pedagogy, curriculum, instructional methods while public universities are also expected to provide the best of service as a result of government supports (Danneels, 2003). In Ghana, unlike countries like USA and UK the public universities have an economic advantage that enables them to use state of the art curriculum and faculty in efforts to maintain higher quality.

However, the private universities faces challenges such as motivation for profit, inability to attract talented students who lack sufficient financial resources, and reliance on revenue from students that force the institutions to view students as “customers” who are paying for services (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Although, it cannot be conclusively determined from this limited study whether the private university or public university in Ghana are of higher quality, the current study will be able to shed some light on the issues and provide directions toward quality improvement initiatives. Total Quality Management (TQM) and other quality management practices have been used since the early 1980s, often to improve credibility with the public, but in many cases, they have been used only in order to satisfy internal accountability (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). While many educators and administrators have suggested a "best-practices" framework, recommending that educational quality be assessed holistically, it is too often the case that, instead, educational quality is assessed by focusing too narrowly on one or two areas of achievement. It is also often the case that higher education institutions assess their programs independently, instead of comparing and contrasting them with other universities.

2.1 Objectives of the Study

Th overall objective of the study is to compare the customer orientation attitude of selected private and public Universities in Ghana. Besides, the study will also examine the probability of private or public Universities being more customer oriented than the other. The study will also determine whether there is a significant difference in Customer Orientation of Private and Public Universities.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Customer Orientation Theory

It was in the early 1970s where more radicals and progressive positions were assumed in education that the concept of customer orientation at a higher educational institution began to cover more areas. The introduction of neoliberalism as a new way of governmentality led to institutional and workplace modification to enable more freedom necessary for individual, institutional and national economic living (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). With "*neoliberals, there is one type of rationality stronger than any other economic rationality*" (Apple, 2015, p. 59), and neoliberal mechanism taking active part in the commercialization of education (Danneels, 2003), HEIs came into physical contact with demands for new duties and low cost of entry into the business education environment.

This in a long run and caused strong competition, work to bring on board and maintain students and also seeking for good students rating and accreditations (Chonko, Tanner & Davis, 2002). Presently, higher educational institutions all round the world are in competition with each other in their quest to get funds from both public and private organizations and also prospective students (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). In order to achieve this, several HEIs place themselves as value creators emphasizing on academic excellence and practitioner orientation. Yet, academic excellence and practitioner orientation are now generic words due to value-creation, many schools now claim to be customer- oriented with hope of getting more students since higher educational institutions that practice customer orientation have a flexible and convenient way of providing their services. Student-customer orientation is very important aspect of this paper and has been explained using the work of Browne (2010) as "*the extent to which a HEI takes a decision and works towards the expectation and needs of the students as well as the institutional aims and goals*" (p. 21).

Hill (2013)'s definition of expectation was that they are "*desires, wants, ideal standards*" (p. 12) and understanding them is very important so as to be able to offer a service experience that will please the other party (Browne, 2010). Arguments regarding existing literature on placing HEI as an institution that is student-oriented remains polarized. To a great extent, there are those who suggest that HEI should pay more attention to customers (students) as well as the remarket of products (that is, education) when demand begins to decline (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). However, others at the other side of continuum disagree and state that student-customer orientation plays no part in professionalism and that the student-customer orientation method is the worst method a HEI can use to attract more students.

Aside from being polarized, literature is also usually harsh on students when they attempt to use the rights of customers and HEI not doing anything about it (Conway, Mackay & Yorke, 1994). The current perspective in the existing literature is that students are no longer held accountable for their studies but have instead passed it onto the educators and that it is them that exercise full control of the education of students (Danneels, 2003). Existing literature is said to be distinctively conceptual - of the various papers published on the subject student-customer orientation, only six empirical works were found by the author to have some direct relationship with the topic at hand.

Nonetheless, a good evaluation of the existing studies showed that the notion regarding students may have been over-generalized in many precise areas and the problem may not have been dealt with very well on a detailed level. The following comprises the limitations of this study; there is serious competition in the educational sector and hence HEI have decided to consider themselves as student-customer orientation. Clear and detailed knowledge has still not been found on whether or not students are beneficiaries of education even with the use of existing instruments and tools (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). This information is however very important when considering HEI as a customer-oriented institution. There have been long and unending arguments about whether HEI should be customer oriented with regards to the marketized sector of education and this comes in as an opportunity for conducting more examination and analysis hence making it possible to significantly contribute to existing conceptual and empirical evidence.

With regards to methodological contribution, the paper develops and verifies the Student-Customer Orientation Measurement Instrument which can be applied to different (comparative) studies with akin objectives. In a practical context, a study was carried out among undergraduate business students, and it was revealed that with HEI offering business education and having to consider themselves as customer-oriented institutions should make sure to apply customer orientation in every aspect or some specific aspects of educational experience. The purpose of this doctoral dissertation to help contribute to the whole idea behind student-customer orientation and to highlight to a detailed extent the various educational experiences in the various aspects of educational experience and to what degree students expect or do not expect a HEI offering business education to be student-customer orientation.

3.2 Exchange Theory

The exchange theory is defined as a universal theory seeking to understand the exchange of material or non-material resources people or groups of people who find themselves in an interactive situation. The work of sociologists Danneels (2003) served as a source of social exchange theory. The definition of exchange theory provided by Horman' is based on Skinner (1953)'s operant psychology he developed. According to Horman (1958), the exchange between individuals keep going on because each to a certain level find the behavior of others affirmative. The behavior could be made up of a compliment, an expression of agreement or help in working on some tasks of mutual interest. From the fundamental propositions found in Hormans' work, they derived two variables. The first variable has to do with the frequency of rewards and costs while the second variable looks into the value attached to the rewards (Cohen, 1988). Certain social exchange behavior involves "costs" while others come cost-free. Example of a compliment (e.g. a flattering remark on what a person chooses to wear) could be relatively low in cost to the person getting it. A significant cost may however be association with other behaviors. This behavior may be considered as social exchange. In a situation where both persons derive pleasure from taking part in it, then each one of them is rewarding the other person just by taking part. However, cost is incurred by one of the players, that is the loser of the game. It the game keeps going on and the same player keeps losing then it will imply that the player is incurring too much cost and might quit playing the game. The value of reward to be acquired is compared with the reward and this was introduced by Hormans. He does this keeping in mind that measuring value is an issue since there may be fluctuations in value as time passes for an individual. The study by Homs' dwelled on the perception that the fundamental principles of human behavior can best be learnt and sourced from an evaluation of small groups of individuals and the interpersonal relations among group members.

If the two players involved in the exchange are equally dependent upon one another, then it is said that "Exchange relations are balanced"; if not, then there are imbalances in the relation. To determine dependence, the value a player places on the resource offered by the other player should be looked at and also the availability of these resources from alternative sources. When dependencies are unequal, they lead to imbalanced exchange relation that, the power dependence principle makes it clear that it generates power advantage for the player that happens to be less dependent. An actor is the structural chance to make use of the potential power that comes about due to the differences in dependences by a power advantage (p. 216).

2.3 Recent Development in the Area of Exchange Theory

Blau (1987) conducted a study and acknowledged the work of Cohen (1988) stating that the work have had impact on his perception about social exchange. According to Brady and Cronin (2001), it was possible to understand the social structure and happenings that take place in the social frameworks by first taking a look at individual activities that happen between people and then making additions to them. This is what his theory of social exchange seeks to achieve.

In the theory of Blau, principles from operant psychology and economics are combined to come up with a conceptual framework for the evaluation of social relations. Blau does not disagree with that fact that individuals WU get involved and maintain relationship as far as individual self-interests can be satisfied and at the same time see to it that the advantages are more than the costs. A person will aim at increasing his or her profits (positive reinforcements, rewards) and decrease losses (negative reinforcements, costs) while interacting with others.

When it comes to continuing relationship, individual will attempt to sustain exchanges that appear to be rewarding in the past, to end the exchanges that appear to coast more than its advantages ad to create new connections that seem will be more rewarding than costly.

An exchange can only take place when there is something to be exchanges. Exchange however does not only apply to the economic market. For instance, Blau postulated that, "*neighbors exchange favors; politicians, concessions; children toys; acquaintances, courtesies discussants, ideas; colleagues, assistances*" (p. 88). Individuals have several social resources of different sorts some of which are, physical beauty or prowess (which is intrinsically attractive to others), expertise (which helps one to be valuable as colleague in a working relationship) or a connection with certain advantageous and prestigious groups. There is the possibility of determining how individual will interact by measuring the value of the different resources to individuals in the group. A lot of the intangible firstly pinpointed by the parties involved. In each day of our lives, we continuously experience issues where we are offered favors and help in exchange for something else attained in the past or with the hope that something will be given in return in the future.

3. Methodology

The study used a descriptive survey design. Three private and public universities in Ghana were targeted. The selection of equal number of private and public universities was to ensure equal representation from both sectors. The study collected data primarily through standardized questionnaires by way of hand delivery. The study analyzed data using the statistical package for social sciences version 21. We used both descriptive and inferential statistics.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Customer Orientation of Selected Universities

The descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. The table below contains a descriptive data (mean and deviations) for the following variables: market orientation and customer orientation. The mean was preferred compared to that of frequency and percentage based on the assertions of Cohen

(1988) who argued that mere percentages do not accurately validate a quantitative report due to the enormous assumptions frequencies portray. The mean categorization was done thus 0.000 to 2.499 equates a low rating for a particular variable, above 2.499 to 3.999 connotes an average rating for a variable while above 3.999 to 5.000 equates a high rating for a variable.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Customer Orientation

		Mean	Std. Deviation
I am always motivated to deliver on the services of the promised to students.	Private	3.4556	1.11781
	Public	2.7211	1.32122
I am well equipped with the right resources to deliver customer service.	Private	2.9882	1.24875
	Public	1.0344	1.09421
Employee mood can affect the effective student service delivery.	Private	3.0355	1.31789
	Public	4.0244	
The organization has a definite student service goal which is being achieved.	Private	2.9641	1.35792
	Public	2.0911	1.09322
Active students' registration portal.	Private	2.9821	1.23671
	Public	3.9032	1.49321
Students' enquiry support/ platform.	Private	3.2485	2.52937
	Public	1.0943	1.04331
Fast and reliable internet access for students.	Private	3.1361	1.22928
	Public	1.0943	104221
Conducive student library and study room.	Private	3.3077	1.21008
	Public	2.0942	190321
Students rest room.	Private	3.1264	1.32212
	Public	1.9388	1.03221

Source: Field data 2021.

Table 1 above, shows the mean and standard deviation under market orientation of the institutions. In terms of the item "I am always motivated to deliver on the services of the promised to students", private universities performed higher with a mean value of 3.4556 as compared to that of public universities who had a mean value of 2.7211. That is, the private universities were more responsive to the students as compared to public universities. Besides, with the item "I am well equipped with the right resources to deliver customer service", private universities responded being more equipped to deliver quality student service (Mean= 2.9882, S.D= 1.24875) compared to public universities (Mean= 1.0344, S.D= 1.09421). The mean score of 3.44 was calculated on the question; Employee mood can affect the effective Student service delivery for private universities compared to 4.0244 for public universities. Besides, the question; the organization has a definite student service goal which is being achieved., obtained a mean value of 2.96 for private universities compared to 2.0911 for public universities.

The next question, active students' registration portal, had a mean value of 2.98 for private universities, on the other hand, public universities scored a higher value of 3.9032. Thus, the public universities use a more active student registration portal compared to that of the private universities on the average, private universities had a significantly higher customer orientation attitude compared to public universities. The average score for both sectors was not that encouraging. That is to say, universities in Ghana do not have a customer orientation attitude towards their students. The inference that could be made is the fact that students are not perceived to be customers from the stand point of the University staff and hence they are treated as such.

4.2 Testing for Significant Difference in Customer Orientation of Private and Public Universities

In testing for significant difference in customer orientation of private and public universities, an independent sample t-test was computed using public and private universities as the test groups. The results have been displayed below:

Table 2: Independent Sample T-test output
for Customer Orientation and Universities Group Statistics

	University Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Customer Orientation	Public University	350	6.7788	.88596	.14187
	Private University	421	7.0238	.81645	.17816

*p is not significant @ .05 level of significance.

Table 3: Independent Samples Test

Independent Samples Test							
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Customer orientation	Equal variances assumed	.370	.005	-1.049	420	.008	-.24496
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.076	44.076	.018	-.24496

From the output table above, it can be inferred that there is a statistically significant difference in the customer orientation behaviour ($t_{(420)}$= -1.049, p>.05) of private universities (M= 6.78, SD= 0.002) and public universities ((M= 7.02, SD= 0.82). That is, there is enough statistical evidence to conclude that private universities have a customer orientation attitude different from that of public universities.

4.3 The Probability that Private University Students will be more Customer Minded Compared to Public University Students

To test whether private university students will be more customer minded compared to public university students, a simple logistic regression was conducted making category of university (covariate), thus public university was coded as 1 and private university was coded as 0. Perception of student as customer was entered as the dependent variable. The results of the logistic regression including the odds ratio, marginal effects, standard error and the associated probability of significance for the category of university variable is output below:

Table 4: Model Summary

Model Summary			
Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	53.330[a]	.110	.231

The model summary indicates a -2 Log likelihood of 53.330. This enables to know how poorly the model predicts the outcomes. Cox and Snell R^2 was also considered as relevant to the overall model and hence was added to the table. Nevertheless, Nagelkerke R^2 have been identified as a modification and is considered more in analysis compared to the Cox and Snell R^2. Nagelkerke R^2, like the R-squared in regression helps to ascertain the association of the model and also aids to know the goodness of fit of the model. A larger Nagelkerke R^2 is indicative of a better model , that is the Nagelkerke R^2 was zero (0) when the model consisted of only the intercept. This however increased when the variable type of university. In the nutshell, type of university contributes to 23% of variation in perception as customer.

Table 5: Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients

		Chi-square	df	Sig.
Step 1	Step	11.687	1	.001
	Block	11.687	1	.001
	Model	11.687	1	.001

The Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients, according to the output, revealed a chi-square statistic of 11.687 on 1 *df*, $p<0.001$. This indicates that the category of university variable has significantly increased the prediction of perception as customer due to their category of university status.

Table 6: Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1[a]	LOC	-1.192	.359	11.012	1	.001	.303
	Constant	4.332	.831	27.211	1	.000	76.129
a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Category of university.							

The table above indicates the state of the model when category of university was entered into the model. The model reveals an odd ratio equation of $ln(odds)=4.332-1.192x_1$ where x_1 category of university. Furthermore, exponentiating the results gives the predicted odds, that is, the predicted odds that a student with an external category of university is likely to be ethical or not. From the above analysis, the predicted odds that a student from a public university is Exp(B) =0.303, however since the coefficient is (-1.192), that is negative, what it implies is that a student with from a public university is 30% less than likely to perceive themselves as customers compared with a student from a private university. Put differently, the analysis revealed that a student from a private university is 30% more than likely to perceive themselves as customers more than those from public universities, with all other variables held constant.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The focus of the first object of this study is analyze the customer orientation attitude of the selected public and private tertiary institutions in Ghana. To attain this objective of the study, various variable were examined, among them are the customer service goal of the university, the customer service attitude of the universities, the availability of the university's service platforms and factors to enhance current service delivery.

Private universities were more motivated to be responsive to students as compared to public universities. The finding opined that people working in the private organization or institution are the ones feeling best at work and are never tired of their job Bristow and Schneider (2003) stated that people working in the private institution were identified to be most motivated and thus work more effectively. The study noted that increased competition and privatization has influenced work culture of both public and private institutions. It is also noted that there is private institution are motivated the most to work in the interest of their customers as a result of the fundamental shift in working attitude and business style due to open market economy in recent times. It is being recommended that universities develop a tailor-made approach to serving their students whiles combining the academic aspects of it. Being customer centred does not mean doing what students want all the time, it means doing what will be in the best interest of students even if they do not understand.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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