
THE INFLUENCE OF CUSTOMER ORIENTATION ON CHOP BAR PERFORMANCE IN GHANA: THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF CUSTOMER EMPOWERMENT AND CUSTOMER PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study investigates the mediating role of customer empowerment and customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance in Ghana.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A quantitative approach was used, collecting data from 767 respondents across six regional capitals in Ghana. The study utilized a structured questionnaire and analyzed the data through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multivariable regression models.

Findings: The results show that customer participation has a positive impact on the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance, and customer empowerment plays a supporting role in enabling this mediation effect.

Practical Implications: The study provides valuable insights for chop bar owners and managers, helping them develop strategies to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Social Implications: The findings can contribute to the overall improvement of the food service industry in Ghana, leading to increased competition and better-quality services for consumers.

Originality: The study's originality lies in its focus on chop bars in Ghana and other sub-Saharan African countries, as well as its introduction of customer empowerment and effective customer participation as mediators connecting customer orientation with chop bar performance.

Keywords: *Customer Orientation, Chop Bar, Performance, Ghana, Customer Empowerment, Customer Participation*

INTRODUCTION

Organizations frequently employ customer participation strategies to bring customers and service providers together for joint development and production of services (Ahn, 2024; Yuk & Garrett, 2023). Customer participation is described as the involvement of customers in the development and delivery of services through various means: information sharing, suggestion-making, disclosure of personal needs, and participation in decision-making (Mursid & Wu, 2022; Asokan et al., 2019). This concept emphasizes that customer participation is primarily a behavioral construct focused on practical actions that reflect customers' investments of time and effort in optimizing service delivery processes and outcomes (Zhang & Yu, 2024). Such investments ultimately contribute to improved decision-making throughout the service experience (Auh et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2010).

Even though the concept of customer participation has gained significant attention in academic literature, it is still not widely implemented in Ghana's chop-bar industry. In Ghana and most other nations in sub-Saharan Africa, chop bars represent a common type of local restaurant (Sato & Tufuor, 2020; Basaaking, 2016). These establishments constitute a major business sector in Ghana (Jibril & Adzovie, 2024), with many of them practicing some form of customer participation (Blinda et al., 2019). This participation allows customers to engage in the production and delivery processes, which makes the chop bar business distinct from other food service models (Leung et al., 2022; Kelley et al., 1990).

By definition, "to chop" in Ghanaian pidgin refers to eating rather than cutting and a "bar" is a place where people congregate. Therefore, a chop bar is fundamentally a location where people gather to eat (Andoh, 2014). In Ghana, these informal food establishments are typically owned by women and can be found in both urban and rural regions, particularly near markets, transportation hubs, and roadside locations. They generally offer affordable traditional African cuisine. Ghanaians widely patronize chop bars, which are viewed as a sub-sector with a sizable market trade component where customers and service providers come together to participate in service co-creation (Alfers & Abban, 2011). This prevalence of chop-bar businesses and their inherent customer participation practices calls for their inclusion in customer participation literature.

While the broader topic of customer participation has garnered attention, including aspects from both customer and firm perspectives (Auh et al., 2019), the specific examination of the chain effects involving customer orientation, customer empowerment, and customer participation leading to chop bar performance has not been a primary focus in existing research. Illustrating these connections demonstrates the potential pathways that can emerge when customers perceive that their participation benefits both themselves and chop bar operators. Mende et al. (2015) emphasize the need to study mediators such as customer empowerment and customer participation linking customer orientation and business performance, noting that "marketers do not yet fully understand the psychological processes related to customer participation" (p. 140). Similarly, Dong et al. (2017) called for more studies testing interactions between customer participation and service providers' related factors. This research responds to these calls by examining the mediating role of customer empowerment and customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance.

In addition, the study introduces the contingency theory of fit and misfit to provide a framework for understanding the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance. The constructs of customer empowerment and customer participation serve as important elements within this relationship. A fit between these constructs and customer orientation may lead to higher chop bar performance, while a misfit can result in lower performance outcomes. According to our research, interventions to create a fit and avoid misfits may include providing information, decision-making power, and training through customer-oriented approaches (Turkulainen, 2022; Menguc et al., 2016). These interventions help establish the conditions necessary for effective customer participation (Zuhroh, 2019; Auh et al., 2019).

Lastly, the study makes a practical contribution by providing chop bars with recommendations for managing the customer participation process to improve performance. It also provides insights for policymakers and government agencies to develop policies and regulations that support the successful management of customer participation in the food service sector, particularly for establishments like chop bars.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF THE STUDY

This study employs the contingency theory of organization to explain the relationships between variables. The contingency theory emphasizes the importance of considering various contextual factors when examining relationships between organizational variables (Maletič et al., 2018). This theory suggests that there is no universally applicable approach to effectively manage or organize an enterprise; rather, effectiveness depends on the specific circumstances faced by the organization. These contingencies may include the organization's size, technology, environment, task complexity, and interpersonal relationships (Abba et al., 2018). The contingency approach underscores the significance of situational effects on organizational management, challenging the notion of a single ideal management approach. Today, this approach dominates theory and research in management literature (Zeithaml et al., 1988). According to Donaldson (2001), the contingency theory of organization is a subset of the broader contingency approach in science, which posits that the impact of one variable on another depends on some third variable. This assumption aligns with our study, as we hold that the effects of customer orientation on chop bar performance are dependent on customer empowerment and customer participation. In developing our interaction hypotheses, we employ a "fit as mediations" argument, where "the fit between the predictor and the mediator is the primary determinant of the criterion variable" (Auh et al., 2019).

The concept of contingency theory centers on organizational adequacy arising from fitting the characteristics of an organization, such as its structure, to contingencies that reflect the organization's circumstances (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). These contingencies include the environment (Burns & Stalker, 1961), organizational size (Child, 1975), and organizational strategy (Myers & Chandler, 1962). The central premise of contingency theory is that no single best way exists to structure or manage an organization effectively. Instead, the optimal approach varies depending on the specific circumstances faced by the organization (Otley, 2016). By accounting for these contingencies, organizations can develop tailored solutions that address their unique needs and challenges, leading to enhanced performance and increased efficiency.

Contingency theory promotes flexibility, customized solutions, and an employee-centered approach (Victor, 2020). It encourages organizations to adapt their structures and processes based on the specific contingencies they face, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and

adaptability in today's rapidly changing business landscape. This theory has significant implications for both researchers and organizations. For researchers, it highlights the importance of understanding and considering various contextual factors when examining relationships between variables, which can lead to more accurate and relevant conclusions (Guerra et al., 2020). For organizations, contingency theory encourages adaptability, flexibility, and a tailored approach to management, recognizing that one-size-fits-all solutions rarely provide optimal effectiveness or efficiency (Pacheco-Cubillos et al., 2024; Vidal et al., 2017).

In the context of service organizations like chop bars, contingency theory focuses on the concepts of fit and misfit to understand how different aspects of the business such as customer orientation, customer empowerment, and customer participation influence performance (Auh et al., 2019). "Fit" refers to the alignment or compatibility between various elements of the organization (structure, processes, and management practices) and the specific contingencies or environmental factors it faces. When these elements align well, they create a harmonious fit that leads to improved performance (Maulidi, 2023; Zuhroh, 2019). For instance, when a chop bar implements a customer-oriented strategy, it ensures that its organizational structure, processes, and management practices are tailored to meet customer needs and preferences. This alignment can lead to customer empowerment, where customers feel more involved in the decision-making process and have greater influence on the services provided. Additionally, customer participation increases as customers are more likely to engage with a business that values their input and concerns.

Conversely, "misfit" occurs when there is a lack of compatibility between an organization's elements and the contingencies it faces. This misalignment can lead to inefficiencies, reduced performance, and ultimately negative consequences for the business. For example, if a chop bar fails to prioritize customer orientation, it may struggle to understand and meet customer needs, resulting in lower customer satisfaction and reduced participation. Contingency theory emphasizes the importance of adaptability and flexibility to ensure that businesses like chop bars can adjust their strategies and practices according to their specific operating context. By doing so, they can achieve an optimal fit, which ultimately leads to improved performance and efficiency. In summary, the fit and misfit concepts in contingency theory highlight the significance of aligning various aspects of a business with its unique environmental factors to achieve enhanced performance and success (Zuhroh, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a quantitative approach, utilizing both stratified and simple random sampling techniques to ensure a representative sample across six cosmopolitan regional capitals in Ghana (Ahmad et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2022). Chop bar owners were selected through simple random selection, while customers were chosen using stratified random sampling to differentiate those who participate in service co-creation from those who do not, providing a more accurate representation of customer involvement levels (Sturgis, 2020). Primary data was collected from 383 chop bar owners and 384 customers in Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, Koforidua, Cape Coast, and Tamale through structured questionnaires, with these locations selected based on their higher likelihood of exposure to global trends and practices, access to diverse customer segments, and efficient management of research resources. The study targeted customers and chop bar owners who actively engaged in service co-creation, focusing on customers from various demographics including travelers, office employees, singles, and spinsters. Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multivariable regression model estimations using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method, while the process macro procedure with SPSS software was utilized to investigate the mediating roles of variables, and causal statistics were employed to evaluate cause-and-effect relationships and the precise impact of one variable on another (Bhanot et al., 2020), enabling a systematic and rigorous exploration of the relationship between customer participation and chop bar performance in urbanized settings.

RESULTS

The study broadly sought to examine the mediating roles of customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance through customer empowerment. The following sections presents the numerical results obtained from the data processing activities.

Reliability Testing Results

The questionnaire instrument used to collect the data contained four constructs, some of which had sub-constructs, for a total of 30 items. The breakdown of the items for each construct is as follows: Customer orientation contained 6 items, customer empowerment had 5 items, customer participation was defined by 5 items, and chop bar performance had 14 items for the three sub-

constructs (5 for customer retention, 5 for sales growth, and 4 for profitability dimensions). This study performed a reliability test to ascertain whether the survey instrument was reliable for measuring its intended constructs. The Cronbach alpha testing procedure was employed to measure the reliability of items in the relevant sections of the questionnaire instrument. The reliability test results are presented in Table 1.1. A Cronbach alpha value of 0.7 or above was considered adequate to measure the internal consistency of the constructs. The results show that customer orientation's five items generated an alpha value of .876, while that of customer empowerment stood at .812. The rest of the results show that customer participation generated a value of .836 while performance made .795. Overall, we see that the items reliably measure or define the constructs for which they were formulated.

Table 1: Reliability Test Results

Variable constructs	Number of items	Cronbach Alpha Value
Customer orientation	5	.876
Customer empowerment	6	.812
Customer participation	5	.836
Performance	14	.795

Mediating Role of Customer Participation

This section presents results for the mediation role of customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and performance. Table 2 contains the regression numbers for the direct effect of customer orientation on performance, with customer empowerment and customer participation as additional independent variables alongside the demographic control variables.

Table 2: Mediation Role of Customer Participation

Variable	B	SE	t-Stat.	Prob.
Direct Effect: DV = Performance				
Constant	3.093	.379	8.155	.000
Age	-.005	.031	-.159	.874
Gender	-.010	.084	-.123	.901
Education	.007	.028	.256	.798
Experience	-.003	.019	-.174	.862
Customer orientation	.109	.064	1.725	.085*
Customer empowerment	.107	.054	1.988	.047**
Customer participation	.101	.041	2.464	.014**
Direct Effect: DV = Customer participation				
Constant	1.507	.474	3.179	.001
Age	.011	.039	.279	.780
Gender	.148	.106	1.398	.163
Education	-.024	.035	-.688	.491
Experience	-.003	.024	-.135	.892
Customer orientation	.152	.080	1.892	.059*
Customer empowerment	.673	.059	11.459	.000***
Indirect Effect: CO → CE → CP → P	.076	.034	2.219	.027**

DV= Dependent variable; CO = Customer orientation; CE = Customer empowerment; CP = Customer participation, and P = Performance

Table 2 contains the results for the direct effect of customer orientation on customer participation, with customer empowerment as an additional independent variable in the presence of demographic control variables. The regression results depict that customer orientation positively explains variations in chop bar performance ($\beta = .109$, $p < .1$) in the first direct effect model, while at the same time having a positive effect on customer participation ($\beta = .152$, $p < .1$) in the second direct effect model. Again, we find that in both models, customer empowerment has positive effects on chop bar performance ($\beta = .107$, $p < .05$) and on customer participation ($\beta = .673$, $p < .01$). These results lead us to establish that customer orientation is directly and statistically important for customer participation and for chop bar performance. Further, it can be observed that customer participation's positive effect on chop bar performance is statistically significant ($\beta = .101$, $p < .05$). This means that customers' participation can be directly associated with chop-bar business performance.

The results pertaining to the indirect effect of customer orientation on chop bar performance mediated by customer participation through customer empowerment are not surprising, given the results from the direct effects of customer orientation, empowerment, and participation on performance and the positive direct effect of customer empowerment on participation. In other words, the significant positive indirect effect of customer orientation on chop bar performance mediated by customer participation through customer empowerment ($\beta = .076$, $p < .05$) makes sense. Overall, these results can be summed up by stating that customer participation positively mediates the nexus between customer orientation and chop bar performance and that effective customer participation's positive mediating role is strengthened by customer empowerment's positive supporting effect on both customer participation and chop bar performance.

DISCUSSION

The study examined the mediation role of customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance through customer empowerment. Outcomes gleaned from the regression estimations are that customer participation positively mediates the customer orientation-chop bar performance nexus. Further, it was observed that customer empowerment offers the supporting route for customer participation's positive mediation role to manifest. These findings substantiate empirical observations made by a few studies. For example, the findings support Eisingerich et al.'s (2014) suggestion that participating customers are able to improve firms' fortunes because they are empowered. Also, Sa et al., (2020) highlighted that service firms' performance enhancements are possible because customers are allowed to take part in decision-making processes. Again, a comparative analysis of the findings of this study can be made with that of Chukwusa (2022). The author discovered that empowerment significantly leads to participation, which makes it possible for firms to see growth in sales. In addition, the result indicates that customer participation matters in service co-creation because it empowers customers to perform (Auh et al., 2019). The findings also support Chen et al., (2016), who reported that customer participation influences firm performance. There are other relationships as well (Anning-Dorson, 2018); one of them is customer orientation, which appropriately provides businesses with the tools they need to be empowered in the customer participation-performance link. This suggests that customer orientation activities have a positive impact on consumer empowerment (Tuan et al., 2019).

According to Feng et al. (2019), firm performance embedded in customer orientation activities is anchored on the degree to which customers are empowered with knowledge that facilitates their participation in service design and execution processes. This observation by Feng et al. is exhibited by the findings of this study, where customer participation serially mediates the nexus between customer orientation and firm performance via empowerment. Studies such as Sood et al., (2010), and Karatepe et al., (2018) acknowledge that the performance of service-based firms does not improve by chance but through the vacuum of customer empowerment and participation. This shows that customer participation generates innovation skills that combine to improve the quality of services, which fuels business performance (Ngo, & O'cass, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study found that customer participation positively mediates the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance through customer empowerment. The results support previous studies that show how empowered customers can improve firms' fortunes through participation in decision-making processes and service co-creation. The findings also suggest that customer orientation provides the necessary tools for customer empowerment, which enables customers to take part in service design and execution processes. Furthermore, the study confirms that customer participation has a positive impact on firm performance, as it generates innovation skills that improve service quality and drive business performance. Overall, the results demonstrate the importance of customer participation and empowerment in mediating the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results, the study recommended that chop bar owners prioritize customer empowerment by providing patrons with the necessary knowledge and tools to participate in service processes, implement employee training programs focused on customer engagement, maintain strong customer orientation practices, and establish regular monitoring systems to track the impact of these strategies on business performance through key indicators and customer feedback.

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