

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF CUSTOMER PARTICIPATION AND ROLE STRESS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AND CHOP BAR PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: This study investigates the mediating roles of customer role stress and customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance in Ghana.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A quantitative approach was employed utilizing both stratified and simple random sampling techniques to collect data from 383 chop bar owners and 384 customers (767 respondents) across six cosmopolitan regional capitals in Ghana (Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, Koforidua, Cape Coast, and Tamale). Structured questionnaires were administered in chop bars focusing on customer participation in service co-development. Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multivariable regression model estimations using ordinary least squares (OLS), with the process macro procedure in SPSS software employed to investigate mediation roles.

Findings: The results reveal that customer orientation positively impacts chop bar performance ($\beta = .123, p < 0.05$), both directly and indirectly. Interestingly, customer role stress acts as an enabler that facilitates the positive and significant mediating effect of customer participation on performance (indirect effect: $\beta = .177, p < 0.05$). Contrary to conventional expectations, customer role stress positively relates to customer participation ($\beta = .335, p < 0.05$), suggesting that when effectively managed through customer orientation, stress can motivate greater customer involvement in service co-creation, ultimately enhancing chop bar performance.

Conclusion: The study concludes that effective customer orientation can reduce stress and improve firm performance by enabling customers to participate in service co-creation without experiencing undue stress.

Recommendations: Chop bars should prioritize addressing customer role stress by providing customers with necessary knowledge and tools for participation in service processes.

Keywords: Customer Participation, Role Stress, Customer Orientation, Chop Bar, Performance

INTRODUCTION

Firms often engage customers in co-creation to bring together customers and service providers in the design and delivery of services (Ahn, 2024; Yuk & Garrett, 2023; Auh et al., 2019). Customer participation is characterized by customers' active involvement in the development and delivery of services through sharing information, making suggestions, expressing their needs, and influencing decisions (Mursid & Wu, 2022; Asokan et al., 2019; Dong & Sivakumar, 2017; Chan et al., 2010). This concept emphasises that customer participation is a behavioural aspect involving customers' commitment of time, effort, and decision-making to enhance service delivery processes and outcomes (Zhang & Yu, 2024; Auh et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2010). The study of customer participation has garnered significant attention for its benefits, with a growing body of evidence suggesting positive outcomes for both businesses and consumers (Auh et al., 2019). Consequently, firms are now widely regarded as essential entities where customers and service providers collaborate to improve the production and consumption of services in real time (Uzkurt, 2010). This trend has led to the emergence of transformational service research (Alves et al., 2016), which investigates the potential of services to enhance users' personal and professional lives by fostering collaboration between customers and service providers to create new services, as evidenced by major corporations like Cisco, Dell, Procter & Gamble, and Starbucks that value customer input through productive research and development activities (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010; Yoon et al., 2022).

Some scholars argue that customer participation in service co-creation is not always beneficial and may have a negative impact on organisational performance (Blut et al., 2020; Chowdhury et al., 2016; Haumann et al., 2015). This indicates that customer participation is a double-edged sword (Li & Li, 2021; Chan et al., 2010) with both dark and bright sides in service co-creation (Wu, 2017; Gebauer et al., 2013). Studying the dark side of customer participation is important because it explains why existing studies have found not only positive effects of customer participation on various service outcomes but also non-significant and negative effects (Haumann et al., 2015). Some researchers contend that customer participation can lead to role stress, which may, in turn, affect organisational performance (Blut et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2019). The repositioning of actively engaged customers in service co-development may result in role tension and negative emotions, diminishing customer satisfaction and the perceived value of participation. As service

development, production, and delivery are traditionally the responsibility of service providers, customers may struggle to understand their new roles when participating, leading to role stress (Blut et al., 2020), defined as stress resulting from various role stressors, including role conflicts, role overloads, role ambiguities, and a lack of clarity regarding the customer's evolving role (Kiroh et al., 2023; Blut et al., 2020; Guthier et al., 2020). A study by Mende et al. (2017) supports this argument, indicating that companies allocating production workload to customers lacking relevant skills may induce role stress, with highly stressed individuals potentially performing poorly in tasks requiring self-regulation (Chan & Wan, 2012).

Despite increasing recognition of customer participation's importance in service delivery, a notable research gap exists regarding mechanisms connecting its positive and negative aspects. Scholars have called for a multiple stakeholder orientation strategy to enhance employee and business performance (Zang et al., 2020; Bussy & Suprawan, 2012; Greenley et al., 2004), yet empirical evidence on operationalising this strategy in small and medium-sized enterprises such as chop bars remains limited. Research has highlighted the importance of adopting an innovative mindset to elevate customer significance in service engagement (Murad & Zaidy, 2022), but more studies are needed to examine customer orientation's role in determining firm success, particularly in small and medium-sized firms (Kiiru & Ngatia, 2022). The literature suggests that improving firm performance requires a culture fostering cross-functional integration (Jiang et al., 2019), but understanding of creating such culture in resource-constrained organisations remains limited. While research has shown that customer orientation connects employment demand impacts to superior customer service and correlates positively with firm performance (Babakus & Yavas, 2010; Neneh, 2018), more exploration is needed regarding dynamic capabilities necessary for enhancing performance through alignment (Chen et al., 2016). Additionally, the specific examination of chain effects involving customer orientation, customer role stress, and customer participation leading to chop bar performance has not been a primary focus, despite Mende et al. (2017) underscoring the necessity of studying mediators because "marketers do not yet fully understand the psychological processes related to customer participation" (p. 140).

Chop bars, a common type of local restaurant in Ghana and other Sub-Saharan African countries (Sato & Tufuor, 2020; Basaaking, 2016; Kwabena et al., 2013), constitute a significant business sector in Ghana (Jibril & Adzovie, 2024). Many chop bars already engage in customer

participation (Blinda et al., 2019), which distinguishes them from other businesses by allowing customers to be involved in the production and delivery processes (Leung et al., 2022; Kelley et al., 1990). In Ghana, a chop bar refers to a local eating establishment where people gather to enjoy traditional African cuisine, often run by women and located in urban and rural areas (Andoh, 2014). These establishments hold a considerable market share, with customers and service providers collaborating to co-create services (Alfers & Abban, 2011), making it an important aspect of customer participation that warrants attention in the literature. Despite this growing recognition, customer participation remains underutilized in Ghana's chop bar industry, representing a significant opportunity for practical application of these concepts.

This study introduces the contingency theory of fit and misfit to provide a framework for understanding the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance, with customer role stress and customer participation as significant mediating elements. A fit between these constructs and customer orientation may lead to higher chop bar performance, while a misfit could result in lower performance. An intervention to create fit and avoid misfits may involve providing information, decision-making power, and training through customer orientation (Turkulainen, 2022; Auh et al., 2019; Zuhroh, 2019; Menguc et al., 2016). The research addresses Dong et al.'s (2017) call for additional research to test interactions between customer participation and factors related to service providers by examining these mediating roles in relation to chop bar performance. Furthermore, the study makes a practical contribution by offering chop bars recommendations for managing the customer participation process to enhance performance, while also providing insights for policymakers and government agencies to develop policies and regulations that support the successful management of customer participation in the food service sector, including chop bars.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF THE STUDY

In Ghana, "chop bars" are casual, informal restaurants serving traditional Ghanaian cuisine that form an integral part of the country's food culture. This study examines the relationships between customer orientation, customer role stress, customer participation, and chop bar performance through the lens of contingency theory. Contingency theory, which has dominated management research and theory, posits that the impact of one variable on another is contingent upon a third variable (Donaldson, 2001). In this context, it suggests that the effect of customer orientation on

chop bar performance is mediated by customer role stress and customer participation. The theory emphasizes that no single, universally applicable approach to management exists; rather, organizations should adapt their structures and processes to suit the specific circumstances they encounter (Abba et al., 2018; Maletič et al., 2018).

Customer orientation is recognized as a critical factor influencing chop bar performance in Ghana. When a chop bar prioritizes its customers' needs and concerns, it creates a welcoming environment that mitigates customer role stress. This is particularly important in Ghanaian society, where cultural norms emphasize respect for elders and authority figures. However, customer role stress can still arise due to factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and limited understanding of traditional cuisine. When customers experience high stress levels, they may be less inclined to participate in the service process or provide valuable feedback, ultimately hindering the chop bar's ability to improve its offerings.

Customer participation serves as another significant mediating variable in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance. When customers feel valued and heard, they are more likely to engage with the service provider and share their thoughts. In Ghana, patrons often hold strong opinions about traditional cuisine and willingly share their perspectives with owners and staff. By actively listening to customer feedback, chop bar owners can enhance their services and products to meet the evolving tastes and preferences of their clientele, creating a virtuous cycle of improvement and customer satisfaction.

The contingency theory framework suggests that implementing a customer-oriented strategy requires aligning an organization's structure, processes, and management practices with customer needs and preferences (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Pennings, 1975). This alignment, or contingency fit, occurs when the organisation's structure, processes, and management practices align with its contingencies, leading to improved performance (Otley, 2016). Conversely, misfit arises when there is a lack of compatibility between the organisation's elements and its contingencies, resulting in inefficiencies and negative outcomes (Vidal et al., 2017). Therefore, chop bar operators must strive to achieve an appropriate fit and prevent misfits that stem from changing contingencies, which can be accomplished by adopting new organizational traits that align well with the new levels of contingency (Donaldson, 2001; Zheng et al., 2023).

Understanding the contingent effects of customer role stress and participation provides valuable insights for chop bar owners and managers in Ghana, enabling them to tailor their service strategies and improve overall performance. As noted by Guerra et al. (2020), contingency theory requires considering various contextual factors or contingencies when examining relationships between variables. By recognizing that various factors influence the relationship between customer orientation and performance, chop bar managers can develop more effective strategies to enhance their business outcomes (Auh et al., 2019; Victor, 2020). This alignment promotes an employee-centred philosophy and fosters a culture of continuous improvement and adaptability in today's rapidly changing business landscape (Victor, 2020). This study's exploration of these relationships contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how chop bars can thrive in Ghana's unique cultural and business environment by properly aligning their customer service approaches with contextual factors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a quantitative approach utilizing both stratified and simple random sampling techniques to ensure a representative sample from six cosmopolitan regional capitals in Ghana. Data was collected from 383 chop bar owners (selected through simple random sampling) and 384 customers (stratified between those who participate in service co-creation and those who do not) across Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, Koforidua, Cape Coast and Tamale. Structured questionnaires were administered in chop bars, focusing on customer participation in service co-development within urbanized settings chosen for their higher exposure to global trends. The study targeted establishments catering to diverse customer populations including travelers, office employees, singles, and spinsters. Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multivariable regression model estimations using ordinary least squares (OLS), with the process macro procedure in SPSS software employed to investigate mediation roles of variables. Causal statistics were utilized to evaluate cause-and-effect relationships and determine the precise impact of one variable on another, enabling a holistic understanding of how customer participation affects chop bar performance in Ghana.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study broadly sought to examine the mediating roles of customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance through customer role stress. 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 40 items. The breakdown of the items for each construct is as follows: Customer orientation contained 6 items, customer role stress contained 15 items, with 5 items each for the three sub-constructs (role overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity). 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. A Cronbach alpha value of 0.7 or above was considered adequate to measure the internal consistency of the constructs..

Table 1. Reliability test results

| Variable constructs | Number of items | Cronbach Alpha Value |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Customer orientation | 5 | .876 |
| Customer role stress | 15 | .778 |
| Customer participation | 5 | .836 |
| Performance | 14 | .795 |

The results show that customer orientation's five items generated an alpha value of.876, while customer role stress's 15 items producing a score of.778. 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.

Mediating Role of Customer Participation in the Relationship between Customer Orientation and Chop Bar Performance through Customer Role Stress

This part of the mediating analysis concerns the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance as mediated by customer participation through customer role stress. In other words, we are interested in examining the mediation role of customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance in the presence of customer role stress. The results of this analysis are submitted in Table 2.

Table 2: Mediation Role of Customer Participation

| Variable | B | SE | t-Stat. | Prob. |
|---|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Direct Effect: DV = Performance | | | | |
| Constant | 2.969 | .391 | 7.602 | .000 |
| Age | .003 | .031 | .098 | .921 |
| Gender | -.010 | .083 | -.123 | .902 |
| Education | .005 | .028 | .188 | .850 |
| Experience | -.001 | .019 | -.039 | .968 |
| Customer orientation | .123 | .063 | 1.941 | .053* |
| Customer role stress | .086 | .038 | 2.288 | .022** |
| Customer participation | .114 | .037 | 3.063 | .002*** |
| Direct Effect: DV = Customer participation | | | | |
| Constant | 1.967 | .534 | 3.681 | .000 |
| Age | .064 | .043 | 1.510 | .131 |
| Gender | .138 | .116 | 1.194 | .233 |
| Education | -.038 | .038 | -.989 | .323 |
| Experience | .009 | .027 | .375 | .707 |
| Customer orientation | .089 | .088 | 1.022 | .307 |
| Customer role stress | .335 | .049 | 6.791 | .000*** |
| Indirect Effect: CO → CRS → CP → P | .177 | .051 | 3.477 | .001*** |

DV= Dependent variable; CO = Customer orientation; CRS = Customer role stress; CP = Customer participation and P = Performance

Table 2 shows that customer orientation contributes substantially to explaining variations in chop bar performance ($\beta = .123$, $p < 0.05$), while its positive effect on customer participation is not statistically supportive ($\beta = .089$, $p < 0.05$). Other results from the direct effect models show that customer role stress positively relates to chop bar performance ($\beta = .086$, $p < .05$), as well as to customer participation ($\beta = .335$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that the stress customers go through

enhances their participation, or that stress exposures compel customers to take an active part in chop bars' service production. Customer participation, in turn, has a positive influence on chop bar performance ($\beta = .114$, $p < 0.05$).

The results from the direct effect models cumulatively translate into the results generated from the indirect effect estimations. For the indirect effect results, we find that customer orientation indirectly affects chop bar performance with customer participation mediation through customer role stress positively ($\beta = .177$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that even in the presence of customer participation and customer role stress in the model, customer orientation's positive effect on chop bar performance remains statistically relevant. Therefore, the significant positive mediation role of customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance, facilitated by the positive role of customer role stress, is observed.

DISCUSSION

The second serial mediation analysis conducted in this study examined chop bar performance as a continuum from customer orientation through customer role stress and customer participation. In other words, the mediating role of customer participation in the relationship between customer orientation and chop bar performance through customer role stress was analyzed. Empirical findings from this analysis indicate that customer role stress acts as an enabler that facilitates the positive and significant mediating effect of customer participation on performance. It was observed that customer orientation mitigates the negative consequences of customer role stress, which perhaps accounts for customer role stress facilitating participation processes towards improved performance.

This evidence aligns with the existing literature, where studies have reported similar findings. For instance, Palacios-Marques et al. (2016) revealed that customer orientation serves as a medium through which role stressors are mitigated, leading to enhanced productivity growth for firms. Yakonadi and Shrestha (2020) likewise observed that customer orientation instils information and knowledge in customers, expediting their participation processes, thereby reducing role stress and subsequently enhancing performance. The findings of Yakonadi and Shrestha, similar to those of this study, illustrate a framework where customer orientation fosters participation by dampening the adverse impacts of role stress. Similarly, Chang and Taylor (2016) reported that customer

participation's contribution to performance is realized through effective and conscious orientation activities. Their results inherently suggest that orientation provides opportunities for customers to learn and collaborate with employees, alleviating the stress associated with participation.

Some studies recognise that firm performance resulting from customer orientation manifests through reduced role stress (Templer et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). These studies appear to underestimate the role of customer participation in the relationship between orientation and firm performance, in contrast to this study. The findings seem somewhat contradictory to those reported by some studies. For example, Blut et al. (2020) argued that if the roles of service-participating customers are altered in any way, stress and negative feelings arise from the process, which ultimately diminishes customers' sense of satisfaction and perceived value of service participation. By inference, without adequate reorientation, firm performance may be adversely affected. The argument put forth by Blut et al. presupposes that customer orientation activities are necessary to restore customers' full and value-driven participation if the firm wishes to achieve performance improvements. Following a similar line of reasoning as Blut et al. (2020), Hu et al. (2017) posit that customers' involvement in employees' tasks for service co-creation purposes results in stressful conditions for both customers and employees, ultimately harming corporate performance.

Implicit in this reasoning is the idea that customer participation potentially jeopardises the relationship between orientation and firm performance, as customer participation in employees' roles can create conflicting situations. This point is supported by Zheng et al. (2020), who added that when employees' expectations become conflicted, stress may ensue, dissatisfaction becomes inevitable, and firm performance ultimately declines. Earlier, Chen et al. (2016) suggested that customer involvement in the co-provision of services exacerbates the stress levels employees experience due to seemingly conflicting demands from customers. In the process, employees may feel less fulfilled in their roles, which unleashes detrimental impacts on firm performance. The findings support the assertion that high firm performance requires effective role stress management (Pandya et al., 2022). Role stress and customer participation are inversely correlated as a consequence of orientation, meaning that by reducing the stresses that customers encounter when participating in service co-creation, customer orientation enhances the effectiveness of customer participation, which in turn improves firm performance. As indicated by Wolgast and Fischer

(2017) and Blinda et al. (2019), management employs orientation as a means to ensure effective customer engagement and to alleviate organizational stress.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings suggest that customer role stress serves as an enabler that facilitates customer participation's positive and significant mediation effect on performance. This is consistent with previous studies that have shown that customer orientation can mitigate the negative consequences of role stress and lead to improved firm performance. The study's findings challenge the view that customer participation increases stress levels and hampers firm performance, which is based on the assumption that conflicts between employees and customers will emerge. Instead, the study suggests that effective customer orientation can reduce stress and improve firm performance by enabling customers to participate in service co-creation without experiencing undue stress. The study's findings have important implications for firms seeking to improve their performance by engaging customers in service co-creation, highlighting the importance of effective customer orientation as a means of reducing role stress and enhancing customer participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Chop bars should prioritise the stress associated with customer roles by providing customers with the knowledge and tools they need to participate in service design and execution processes. This will lead to improved customer satisfaction and business performance. By involving customers in these processes, businesses can tap into valuable insights and ideas, resulting in more innovative service offerings and enhanced performance. Moreover, chop bar owners should encourage customer participation in decision-making processes and co-creation activities related to services. Offering training programmes for staff on how to effectively engage and empower customers can be highly beneficial. Such training can assist employees in developing the skills necessary to interact with customers in a manner that promotes participation and empowers them to take an active role in the service delivery process.

In addition, chop bars should continue to prioritise customer-oriented activities that focus on understanding and meeting customer needs. By aligning their strategies with customer preferences and expectations, chop bars can enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately improving overall performance. It is essential for chop bars to regularly monitor and evaluate the impact of

customer role stress and participation on business performance. Last but not least, by tracking key performance indicators and soliciting feedback from customers, businesses can identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments to optimize performance.

Study Limitations

The study's generalisability is limited by its sample size and geographic scope. The research only surveyed 767 respondents from six cosmopolitan regions in Ghana, which may not be representative of the entire population of chop bars and customers in the country. Additionally, the study's focus on urban areas may not adequately capture the experiences and perceptions of customers and chop bar owners in rural areas.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework of the study is based on contingency theory, which may not fully encompass the complexities of customer participation in service co-creation. The research assumes that customer participation is a linear process that can be explained by a few key variables, which may oversimplify the actual mechanisms at play. Moreover, the study's failure to consider alternative theoretical frameworks or perspectives may limit its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of customer participation.

Lastly, the study's findings are constrained by its focus on a specific industry (chop bars) and a particular aspect of customer participation (service co-creation). It does not generalise its findings to other industries or aspects of customer participation, which may restrict its practical applications and implications for other fields. Additionally, the study's failure to consider potential moderating variables or interactions between variables may limit its ability to offer nuanced insights into the relationships between customer participation and chop bar performance.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could investigate the development and testing of an intervention aimed at improving customer orientation and reducing customer role stress in chop bars. This could involve designing a training programme for chop bar staff to enhance their understanding of customer needs and preferences, as well as providing strategies for managing stress and conflict in high-pressure service environments. The study could employ a quasi-experimental design, comparing the outcomes of chop bars that receive the intervention with those that do not.

Additionally, future research could explore the role of technology in improving customer orientation and reducing customer role stress, such as the use of mobile apps or AI-powered chatbots to provide personalised recommendations or stress-reduction techniques to customers. By examining the effectiveness of such interventions, researchers could offer practical insights for chop bar managers and owners seeking to enhance the customer experience and increase customer loyalty.

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