Attitudes toward Student-Customer Concept: Educational Level, Institution Status and Interdisciplinary Studies

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ABSTRACT

The study explores student attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations based on three units of analysis–educational levels (undergrad vs. graduate), institution status (public vs. private), and interdisciplinary (technology, engineering, and business). It also examines students' opinions toward using the student-customer concept in higher education. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to answer the research questions. The quantitative analysis results indicate that, in overall, students disagree to use the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations. In particular, undergraduate students disagree to use the student-customer concept more than graduate students do. Students in public and private universities have no significant difference regarding their attitudes toward using the student-customer concept. Engineering students have negative attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in both fundamental and higher educations more than business and technology students have. The qualitative analysis results indicate that some students prefer the student-customer concept to be used in higher education as universities/colleges will improve their service quality for students. In contrast, most students perceive that using the student-customer concept in higher education will degenerate instructor's attention and instructor-student relationship, alter the main objective of educational institutions, and negatively affect the society. The study reports the analysis results and discusses the findings, implications and limitations.

Keywords: education, student-customer, attitudes, educational level, interdisciplinary, institution status

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of reduced government funding and increased competitiveness in the educational market, educational institutions are under constant review on the need of economic accountability and performance improvement. They have competed with one another to attack and retain students as well as regain trust from the public. Higher education institutions have reshaped their educational practices and adopted customer satisfaction perspective of total quality management (TQM) in the hope that it will be the key to survival as it happened in the business sector [1,15]. TQM is originally employed by businesses to improve organizational performance which aims to maximize levels of consumer satisfaction resulting in higher profitability for the organization. If educational institutions can not meet customer (student) satisfaction, they would face bleak enrollment growth and financial problems [15]. Many educational institutions, therefore, adopt the students-customers concept as the organization's policy and practice. It has been reported that the educational institution's policy directly affects teaching-learning environment in classroom resulting in student competency and institution's profitability [1,2,17,18].

Many academics are arguing the consequences of the student-customer concept in higher education under instructor perspectives [4,5,10,14]. Little or no research, however, has been empirically undertaken on the use of the student-customer concept in fundamental (primary/secondary) and higher (college/ university) educations under student perspectives, and investigated the effects of student characteristics (e.g., educational levels and major studies) on student attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in both educations. In addition, as the improper educational practices directed by the educational institution's policy can lead to the diminished student competency [17,18], it is important to understand how students who are directly affected by the institution's policy perceive the use of student-customer concept in their learning environment. Accordingly, this study aims to explore whether students agree to use the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations, and examines their perceptions regarding the effects of the student-customer concept on higher education.

The study addresses three following research questions. First, do student attitudes toward the student-customer concept significantly differ between higher education and fundamental education? Second, do student characteristics in terms of educational levels (undergraduate vs. graduate), institution status (public vs. private), and academic disciplines (business, technology, engineering) affect student attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations? Third, why do students think higher education institutions (colleges/universities) should or should not treat students as customers? The first two research questions will be addressed by a quantitative data analysis while a qualitative data analysis will respond to the last research question.

The next sections provide literature review of the student-customer concept, research methodology, and analysis results. The discussions of the findings, implications and limitations of this study are provided subsequently.

2. THE STUDENT-CUSTOMER CONCEPT

Globalization has forced educational processes toward educational marketing and consumption [1,2]. Education is now governed by consumer orientation and teaching process geared to consumer satisfaction. Many educational institutions aim to treat their students as customers and restructure their educational practice based on the concept of market consumption. This includes the assessment of academics by student-customer, student-customer complaints and appeal processes, and procedural flexibility for educational institutions to tailor different group of student-customer [2]. Under marketing and consumption perspectives, the customer is always right. Instructors are expected to entertain students rather than challenge them to participate in classes. Students' appraisal of teaching provides indirect control over instructors. Instructors who have conflicts with students will have consequences for career prospects [2,5,10].While instructors attempt to avoid negative feedback from their students by providing grade inflation and other efforts to satisfy students, universities help students to obtain academic degrees as fast as possible by establishing interlinked campuses and offering distance learning and e-learning programs.

Higher education in Thailand is facing high competitive pressure. Many state colleges have been promoted to become accredited universities while many universities established their own private colleges and offered generic, fast-track programs to attack high demand in higher education. Education, therefore, becomes commodity product and more educational institutions become "McUniversities" providing fast and commodity product (education) for customers (students) [3,7]. In addition, most parents are willing to invest in their children's fundamental education (primary/secondary schools) while graduated students want to pursue higher education for their future career. With the high demand and competitive in educational market, colleges and universities have followed a business practice by embracing the customer satisfaction strategy as the key to recruit and retain students in their institutions. While universities deploy the student-customer concept for their management practice, students see themselves as customers because they have engaged in an economic agreement for buying services [8]. As service customers, students are given opportunities to express their wants and satisfaction with their learning environment. Universities, on the other hand, attempt to meet student satisfaction and value-for-money.

Under the student-customer concept, educational institutions are producers and deliverers of services. They need to manage operations, monitor efficiency, enhance delivery, and produce quality services that meet the student expectations [5]. On the other hand, students act as passive consumers of the university services [11]. They can make a purchase decision on the university's services and provide feedback either complaint or satisfaction to the university in the same way they purchase everyday products from the shops [5]. Furthermore, the student-customer concept undermines the student's sense of responsibility for their own learning [9]. Students shift the responsibility for their learning to instructors. They are motivated to learn only by their self-interest that results in disinclination to classroom participation and team assignments [5,12]. They will shop for the most comfortable courses which are easily to pass assessment, and expect good grades regardless

of the amount of efforts they put on their works. They may penalize demanding instructors through critical feedback on teaching performance if they do not get the grade they expect [5,6]. Table 1 summarized the student-customer concept.

Table 1 Summary of the student-customer concept

Key issues	'Student as Customer' Concept
Reason	To retain its position and compete with others in the high competitive environment
Aim	Maximize student-customer satisfaction
University Metaphor and Roles	Metaphor: University is a service producer and deliverer. Role: To manage, monitor, and produce quality services that meet the student expectations.
Instructor Metaphor and Roles	Metaphor: Instructor is a service provider and entertainer. Role: To delight students and avoid negative feedback from students.
Student Metaphor and Roles	Metaphor: Students are passive consumers of the services. Role: To make purchase decision on the university services and provide feedback to the university in relation to their satisfaction with services consumed.

It has been reported that the educational institution's policy has a direct effect on teaching and learning environment resulting in the levels of student achievement and competency [17,18]. As a result, educational institutions should be aware of the adoption of the student-customer concept as the organization's policy.

3. METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, this study was designed on the exploratory basic through a survey method. A questionnaire consists of closed and open-end questions. Participants were asked for their opinions whether colleges/universities and elementary/secondary schools should treat students as customers. These questions were measured by five-point Likert scales (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree). The participants were also asked to explain their reasons supporting the previous question in an open-end question. Questions about the participant's age, gender, educational levels, institution's name, major of study, were also included in the questionnaire. Some responses obtained in Thai language were translated back into English. The data were collected from 239 students studied at four higher education institutions including a public college, a private university, and two public universities. The sample involved two educational levels (i.e., undergraduate and graduate levels) and various majors of studies which were grouped into three major disciplines-business (i.e., business administration, international business, business art, marketing, finance), technology (i.e., information technology, technology management, computer science), and engineering (i.e., mechanical and aerospace engineerings).

Several research techniques were applied in this study to improve the research's quality [13,16]. The study built a database that enabled the data collected to be documented and organized. This database facilitated analyses, and the evidence used in the study could be tracked to its origin through its reference codes. The informal interviews with some students were used to certify their responses to the questionnaires. Finally, the results were discussed with a proficient scholar to validate the researcher's conclusion of the qualitative analysis.

4. ANALYSIS RESULTS

The study deploys quantitative and qualitative data analyses to answer the research questions. To address the first two research questions, the quantitative analysis examined the statistical differences between mean of the participants' attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental education (primary/secondary schools) and higher education (colleges/universities). The analysis was based on three groups–two levels of education (undergraduate and graduate), two institution status (private and pubic colleges/universities), and three major disciplines (business/technology/engineering). The qualitative analysis then examines the participants' opinions toward treating students as customers in higher education responding to the third research question.

Quantitative Analysis Results

Table 2 shows the mean scores of participant attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations in relation to each group of analysis. All group of participants disagreed with primary/secondary schools and colleges/universities to treat their students as customers (mean>3.0) excepting graduate level and business discipline groups that fairly agreed with universities (higher education) to treat their students as customers (mean<3).

Table 2 Participant attitudes based on groups of analysis

Demographics	%	Fundamental edu. Mean	SD.	Higher edu. Mean	SD.
Levels					
Undergrad	67.8	3.72	1.18	3.45	1.31
Grad	32.2	3.16	1.26	2.64	1.29
Status					
Private	56.9	3.44	1.18	3.04	1.35
Public	43.1	3.79	1.32	3.56	1.35
Disciplines					
Business	31.0	3.41	1.19	2.73	1.36
Technology	48.1	3.42	1.24	3.23	1.34
Engineering	20.9	4.02	1.16	3.76	1.17

Table 3 indicates that most participants fairly disagreed that students should be treated as customers in fundamental and higher educations (mean>3). It also indicated that the participants' preferences for treating students as customers between fundamental education and higher education had statistically significant differences (p<.000). Compared to higher education, participants more disagreed that elementary/secondary schools should treat their students as customers (mean: 3.54 > 3.19).

Table 3 Comparison between fundamental and higher educations

Preferences for the concept to be used in	Mean	t	p
Fundamental Education	3.54	-6.042	.000
Higher Education	3.19		

Table 4 shows that the mean value of attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations between undergraduate and graduate samples were significant difference (p=.001; p=.000). Undergraduate students disagreed on the student-customer concept to be used in both fundamental and higher educations higher than graduate students did (mean: 3.72 > 3.16; 3.45>2.64 in Table 2). Table 4 also shows that there

are no significant differences between private and public samples regarding their attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations (p>.05). In addition, engineering students had significantly different opinions from business and technology students in terms of their negative attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental education (p=.005; .004) and in higher education (p=.000; .018). Table 2 indicates that all discipline samples (business, technology, and engineering) disagreed on the student-customer concept to be used in fundamental education (mean>3). Engineering students had the most disagreeable value (mean=4.02) while business students had the least (mean=3.41). On the other hand, in higher education, business and technology students had statistically significant differences on their attitudes toward treating students as customers (p=.013). Technology students were more disagreeable that universities should treat their students as customers (mean: 3.23>2.73).

Table 4 Differences between samples' mean

Samples	Preferences for using the student-customer concept in			
	Fundamental Edu.		Higher Edu.	
	t	p	t	p
Undergrad vs. Grad	3.383	.001**	4.484	.000***
Private vs. Public	.061	.951	.803	.423
Business vs. Engineering	2.837	.005**	-4.355	.000***
Business vs. Technology	-.066	.948	-2.501	.013*
Technology vs. Engineering	2.902	.004**	-2.392	.018*

*p < .05, ** p <.01, *** p<.001

Qualitative Analysis Results

The qualitative analysis results are described in the dichotomy between participants who agreed and disagreed on the student-customer concept to be used in education institutions. Students who agreed on this concept to be used in educational institutions asserted that a good quality of desired services would be obtained in exchange of their money as they believed that a customer was the most important person and customer satisfaction was the first priority for any businesses. One student claimed that businesses (universities) obtained money from clients (students); thus they were liable to provide services to those clients. Some students believed that universities as businesses could not ignore market or consumer orientation. One student pointed out that "almost everything in the world is business". Another student supported that, "we are in the world of what we call market economy and society".

In contrast, most students who disagreed on the student-customer concept contested that money-product exchange and profit maximization in the marketing context were not appropriate to be used in the education environment. One student perceived that being treated as customers meant selling things to students. If students had no money, universities would not service them. Some students accentuated the concept of unfair treatment in education associated with the rights and equality to have education for those who have no money. The

relationship between student and instructor was concerned by some students if the student-customer concept was adopted by universities. In addition, some students were aware of their instructors' behaviors and teaching performances if those instructors treated them as customers because of the university's policy. Further discussion and conclusion of the qualitative analysis are provided in the following section.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The first research question has been examined. The result shows that student attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in fundamental education and higher education are significant differences (Table 3). Students disagree to use the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations. In particular, they disagree with primary/secondary schools to treat their students as customers higher than colleges/universities to treat their students as customers. This might imply that students at primary/secondary schools are young and need to be substantially guided by the teachers rather than students at colleges and universities who are more mature and can select what they want to buy or learn. These young students-customers, if accepted, are more likely to select the wrong products (studies) than more mature students. One student contended that:

> "Because they are not adult, there's something they don't know what is good or not. They need to be protected, not treating them as customers" (grad/pub/bus)

The second research question has been responded. Based on the quantitative analysis results, Table 5 summarizes that the student characteristics based on educational levels (undergraduate vs. graduate), institution status (public vs. private), and academic disciplines (business, technology, engineering) have effects on student attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations. Each of these effects is explained as follows.

Table 5 Attitudes towards using the student-customer concept in educations

Samples	Fund.Edu.	Higher Edu.	Differences
Edu.Level			Sig. diff.
Undergrad.	disagree	disagree	Undergrad >
Grad.	disagree	slightly agree	Grad.
Inst. Status			
Private	disagree	neutral	Not sig. diff.
Public	disagree	disagree	(on both edu.)
Disciplines			Sig. diff.
Business	disagree	slightly agree	Engineering >
Technology	disagree	disagree	Technology >
Engineering	disagree	disagree	Business

Educational level: Undergraduate students disagree to use the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations while graduate students slightly agree to use this concept in higher education (mean=2.64). In addition, graduate students disagree on the student-customer concept to be used in fundamental and higher educations less than undergraduate students do. It might imply that graduate students have more concern on their money. They expect their universities to treat them as customers to obtain the best services in return for their money. Unlike most graduate students who pay for their own

education, undergraduate students are paid for their education by their parents. One of undergraduate students supported that "Parent is the one who pay money. Parent is client".

Institution status: Students in private and public universities disagree with the education institutions (schools, colleges, and universities) to treat students as customers, and there is no significant difference of their attitudes between the two groups of students. Interestingly, as most private universities are self-funding organization, students studying in private universities pay higher costs than students studying in public universities. However, students in private universities do not expect to be treated as customers the same as those in public universities. It might imply that students do not see the difference between public and private universities associated with the adoption of the student-customer concept in universities.

Interdisciplinary: Most students in the three disciplines (business, technology, and engineering) disagree that the student-customer concept should be used in both fundamental and higher educations. Students in business discipline, however, slightly agree with the student-customer concept to be used in higher education (mean=2.73). Students among three disciplines have significant differences of their attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in both fundamental and higher educations. Compared to technology and engineering students, business students have the most likely to accept the student-customer concept to be used in both educations especially in higher education. It might imply that students in the business major engaged in the economic and business environments from their class studies or their work experiences which enable them to handily accept the economic exchange of money and services associated with the student-customer concept.

The last research question has been responded by the qualitative analysis results. Students who agree that colleges/universities should treat their students as customers expect to get better services in return for their money the same as customers who choose to buy the best product. For examples,

> "Because service receivers are customers we have to treat them with *the best care...*" (grad/pub/tech)
> "Teachers might *give students more respect* as they are customers" (grad/pub/bus)
> "They will *treat you well* because a customer is the first priority for any business" (ugrad/pri/tech)
> "Must always bear in mind that a service receiver is *a customer who must be cared*" (grad/pub/tech)

On the other hand, most students who disagree on the student-customer concept contest that the student right to study is more important than the marketing perspective. Universities should treat students equally regardless of the students' social status. Some students support that university is a place for students to get educated, and not a place to get money. Others want their instructors to treat them like their family members or like parents who treat their own children. In summary, under the student perspectives, the student-customer concept might yield four negative concerns—institution's objective, instructor's attention, instructor-student relationship, and social issue as shown in Figure 1.
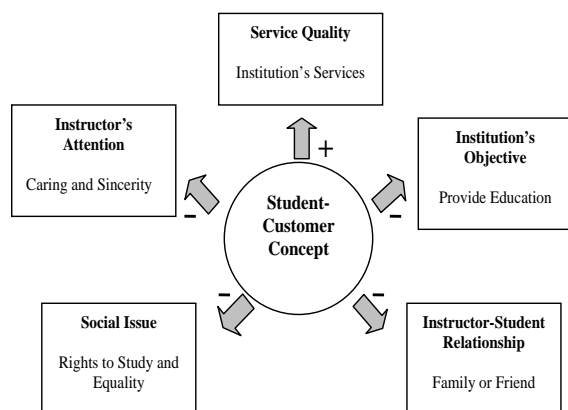
Figure 1. Effects of the student-customer concept on higher education under students' perspectives

Institution's objective: Students are afraid that an institution' objective to provide education might alter if they were treated as customers. For examples,

> " .... I don't think that we should be treated as customers because this is *only a place to get educated*…" (ugrad/pri/tech)
> "...should not treat as customers. Educational institutions have *responsibilities for giving education* ...." (grad/pub/tech)
> "Because the goal is *to offer them (students) the best quality of teaching* and not to please them" (grad/pub/bus)
> "Because those (schools and universities) should treat their service users *with the real objective of those places*, not for marketing objectives that the real purpose is to get more money from their service users" (ugrad/pri/tech)

Instructor's Attention: Students are aware of their instructor's attention. Instructors might not pay attention to their students. They might focus on the profits they can gain rather than the efforts they give for teaching. For examples,

> "…must *sincere* to teach students rather than only want to get money" (grad/pub/tech)
> "Because it is not the commercial and business services, but must have *willingness and sincere* in giving a service" (grad/pub/tech)
> "Teachers should *care* about students, not because they provide you money" (grad/pri/tech)
> "Student needs to be treated with a *good care*. Business satisfies customers only, not always care them" (ugrad/pri/tech)

Instructor-student relationship: Students also realize that relationship with their instructors may be changed if they are treated as customers. They expect to have a close relationship like family members and friends with their instructors rather than customer-provider relationship. For examples,

> "Students should be treated as *friends* because they can do better job" (ugrad/pri/tech)

> "Should be treated as *family members*, who really treat with heart" (grad/pri/tech)
> "Teachers should see students like *their child* who want to have knowledge" (ugrad/pub/eng)
> "I want them to teach us as *their children* like parents do. Money can not buy subject or grade" (ugrad/pri/bus)
> "Because it's *not customer relationship* but giving knowledge and help each others" (ugrad/pub/eng)

Social issue: If universities treat students as customers, students realize that some persons may not be able to study in universities as they don't have enough money to pay for. They expect everyone should have the same opportunities and the rights to get education. For examples,

> "Should not be treated as customers because it means that if someone does not have enough money they have no *right to get education*" (ugrad/pri/tech)
> "Students are the fundamentals of the nation, everyone should have *the right to learn* in what they want... not only people who have money" (ugrad/pub/eng)
> "Every one has *the right to learn* without payment" (ugrad/pub/eng)
> "Students should be treated *equally*" (ugrad/pri/tech)
> "Everyone has *equal status*, treating as customer…only mind in benefits (grad/pub/tech)

In summary, although students may obtain better service quality (e.g., facilities and administrative services) from their universities, they perceive some negative effects on their learning environment if universities treat them as customers. Educational institutions, therefore, should align the student-customer concept with an organization strategy efficiently. According to the findings, educational institutions should attempt to minimize the students' negative concerns about the student-customer concept by shifting the producer-consumer relationship to the instructor-student relationship such as establishing family and friendly environments, and enhancing instructor's concern about their students and teaching performance. Universities should retain their main objective to provide people's education rather than maximize profits. The important goals for educational institutions are to help students preparing for their future and to provide what they need rather than what they want. For the effect of using student-customer concept on the society, universities with some supports from government should provide funding for some students, who have no money but want to study, to have the equal opportunity to get education. Most governments provide some or full supports for fundamental education, but there are few supports for higher education.

6. LIMITATIONS

This exploratory study has some limitations. Firstly, the study only focuses on the students' perceptions of the student-customer concept. The perceptions from other staff such as instructors and administrators who involve in the student-customer practice might be different. Secondly, the validity of the measures may be questioned. Each student has more than one testing attributes. The effect of one attribute might overpower that of another one. Thirdly, the study was conducted in Thai colleges and universities. The national culture might affect the results as western and eastern cultures have some

differences. Fourthly, the generalization of the results should be done cautiously because the sample size is quite small for quantitative analysis. The study, however, was largely exploration and the small sample is not crucial for qualitative analysis [13,16]. Finally, the study is a cross-section study. Student's attitudes may change overtime. A longitudinal study should be conducted to keep track of this change and verify the study results.

7. CONCLUSION

The study explores the factors influencing students' attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations, and examines the consequences of using the student-customer concept in higher education under student perspectives. Students are aware of applying the student-customer concept to fundamental education rather than higher education. The institution statuses (public and private) do not have significantly different impact on student attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations. The educational levels and academic disciplines, however, cause the different attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations. To efficiently align the student-customer concept with an organization strategy, educational institutions should understand why students in each group perceive the student-customer concept in different way. Perhaps, the institution's practice for this concept is unclear on the students' viewpoints. According to the study, some students perceive a benefit of using the student-customer concept in terms of the institution's service quality they can gain. Most students, however, dislike applying the student-customer concept to the education context because this concept yields negative effects on teaching and learning environments associated with instructor's attention, instructor-student relationship, and university's objective. It also has a negative effect on society in terms of people's rights and equality to have education. Although the adoption of the student-customer has several negative concerns, educational institutions might be unavoidable to adopt the student–customer concept in order to persist and retain competitiveness in the educational market. However, they should understand that 'educational customers' are different from 'market customers' who buy the consumer goods and simply pay money in return for their goods or services. They should not sacrifice educational quality and academic standards to accommodate students-customers.

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