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# Employees' customer orientation and customer satisfaction in the public utility sector

## The mediating role of service quality

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The mediating  
role of service  
quality

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to ascertain how perceived service quality mediates employees' customer orientation and customer satisfaction in the public utility sector.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study focused on the commercial customers (small and medium-scale enterprises – (SMEs)) of Electricity Company of Ghana Ltd. There were 350 SMEs sampled for the study, and each had no more than 99 employees. Respondents were either owner-managers or employee-managers. Structural equation model (SEM) was used in estimating the effects among the variables studied.

**Findings** – Most public institutions have a built-in customer base, and therefore places less emphasis on employees' customer orientation. This notwithstanding, findings revealed that employees' customer orientation behaviors significantly impacted customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction toward public institutions. Similarly, customers' perceived service quality influenced their satisfaction toward public institutions. SMEs serve as an engine for economic growth in an economy, and therefore public institutions must consider their peculiar needs in the delivery of service to them.

**Originality/value** – This study pointed out that, employees' customer orientation behaviors of public institutions have an influence on customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction. Previous studies on these concepts have largely focused on the private sector, where there are lots of competition. This study also specifically studied commercial customers (SMEs) of public institution, which is quite novel, especially in relation to the concepts studied. And the contribution of SMEs to economic growth makes their study even much more important.

**Keywords** Service quality, Customer satisfaction, Employees' customer orientation, Public utility sector

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

Customer orientation forms part of the broader service quality concept, which is influenced directly by human factor dimensions (Drury, 2000). The human factor dimensions relate to the attitude and behavior of employees toward customers, and this has been of interest to researchers in services marketing. Studies have therefore looked at customer orientation of service employees (COSE) in relation to satisfaction, consumers' affective commitment and loyalty (Dean, 2007; Korunka *et al.*, 2007; Hennig-Thurau, 2004) and service quality (Rafaeli *et al.*, 2008; Atuahene-Gima and Ko, 2001). Donovan and Hocutt (2001) also studied customer evaluation of service employees' customer orientation. However, studies measuring the influence of employees' customer orientation on service quality and customer satisfaction in the public utility sector, from the perspective of small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) is very limited. SMEs are however very important for the economic growth of every nation, and offering them an improved service quality goes a long way to help the general economy.



Studying the Ghanaian public sector was also necessary as they seem to be lagging behind in the implementation of effective market orientation activities, which include customer orientation (Novixoxo *et al.*, 2018; Bamfo and Dogbe, 2017). As indicated, the marketing concepts such as customer centeredness, service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, etc., have not been a priority for public service firms, because they have a built-in customer base (Novixoxo *et al.*, 2018; Akinboade *et al.*, 2012; Whelan *et al.*, 2010; Perryer, 2009; Korunka *et al.*, 2007; Brown *et al.*, 2002). Competition in the marketplace usually compels service providers to be customer centered, however, electricity power supply in most Sub-Saharan African countries is controlled by the state (Chodzaza and Gombachika, 2013), making the sector monopolistic. A firm's vision of customer orientation is enforced by top-management, however, Kuada (2006) found no significant relationship between top management emphasis and customer orientation among service firms in Ghana. Despite this, Mustak *et al.* (2013) indicated that, consumers of public sector institutions want the employees of service providers to be customer oriented and involve customers in the creation of value. In some cases, consumers even embark on demonstrations due to dissatisfaction with public service delivery (Chodzaza and Gombachika, 2013).

The electricity sector of Ghana, which is the focus of this study, has remained a very critical sector for the nation's long-term sustainable development. Ghana has two electric power distributors, which are, Northern Electricity Department Company (NEDCo) and Electricity Company of Ghana Limited (ECG). NEDCo, as a subsidiary of the Volta River Authority, supplies power to northern Ghana (Brong-Ahafo, Northern, Upper East and Upper West Regions). Its operations also extend into the northern parts of Volta, Ashanti and Western regions. NEDCo's operations cover about 64 percent of the geographical area of Ghana, however, the customer density of the operating area is low with access to electricity, compared to the other parts of the country. ECG on the other hand, supplies power to the remaining parts of the country. Both NEDCo and ECG are however under the control of the national government. The sector was deemed to be appropriate for this study because over the years, there have been complaints regarding the attitude and behavior of the public utility sector employees.

It must be acknowledged that, a number of studies (such as, Bruno, 2018; Karlsson *et al.*, 2016; Wallin Andreassen, 1994; Whelan, *et al.*, 2010; Brown, *et al.*, 2002; Perryer, 2009; Shaik and Nakkina, 2014) have been conducted on customer orientation in the public sector. However, these works did not pay particular attention to measuring employees' customer orientation from the perspective of customers. Hennig-Thurau's (2004) study, despite measuring employees' customer orientation from customers' perspective, focused on the private sector. This notwithstanding, Hennig-Thurau's study only focused on employees' customer orientation, satisfaction and retention without considering the role of service quality delivery. Service quality is however a very important services marketing concept which is worth considering in a critical sector like the utility. Hence this study seeks to assess the impact of customer orientation behavior of ECG employees on customer satisfaction, and service quality as a mediating variable (from the perspective of SMEs as customers). The importance of SMEs to the economic development of any nation cannot be overemphasized, and therefore findings from the study will help decision makers in public sectors to make reforms necessary for enhancing the growth and development of SMEs. The growth and development of SMEs would also help in reducing unemployment rate, which is becoming a challenge in Ghana.

## 2. Theoretical and literature review

### 2.1 Theoretical review and framework

The study was founded on the assimilation-contrast theory propounded by Anderson (1973), who was motivated by the work of Sherif and Hovland (1961) on post-exposure product performance. The theory suggests that if performance of product or service falls

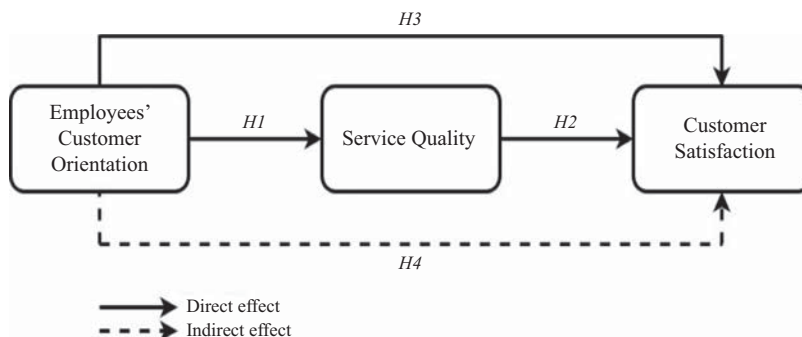
within customer's range of acceptance, the discrepancy between expectation and actual will be disregarded even if it was negative (Vavra, 1997). The consumer thus falls on assimilation, and accepts the product or service performance. If the performance also falls within the region of rejection, contrast prevails and the discrepancy will be exaggerated, by considering the product or service acceptable (Vavra, 1997; Yau and You, 1994). The theory combines both assimilation and contrast theories. In the case of this study, because ECG is a monopoly, SMEs as customers are likely to accept service delivery so long as performance falls within the range of acceptance, even in moments of negative discrepancies. Services may not meet expectations, but the cost of ECG power compared to other alternate sources would still make it acceptable (using assimilation). When services of ECG fall within the range of rejection, SMEs could lower their expectations by considering the difference as being exaggerated (concept of contrast).

Figure 1 depicts key services marketing constructs in the proposed conceptual framework and the tested hypothesized relationships. The concepts in the framework are common in marketing literature, however, the relationships depicted in the framework, as well as focusing on SMEs, makes this study novel. Past studies on employees' customer orientation largely concentrated on the direct effect on customer satisfaction, without considering how service quality could meditate this relationship (e.g. such as Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Donovan *et al.*, 2004; Korunka *et al.*, 2007; Kelley, 1992). The current study therefore proposes that the satisfaction of customers could be influenced by the employees' customer orientation with service quality playing a mediating role between the relationship. The review of the literature thereof provides the justification and support for the relationships included in the framework.

In an attempt to measure the employees' customer orientation, Kelley (1992) developed a conceptual framework to assess COSE and its association with their perceived level of organizational socialization, and perceptions of the organizational climate for service, motivational effort and direction, and organizational commitment. Data were collected from employees in the financial services industry to test their framework using structural equation modeling techniques. The result of the study revealed that there were higher levels of customer orientation relationship with all the variables. The study however did not test the framework from the customers' perspective in order to determine how customer orientation of service workers will affect their service quality leading to the satisfaction of the customer.

Donovan *et al.* (2004) in order to assess other outcomes of customer orientation, based on person-situation interaction and fit theory, developed and tested a model that could explain the impact of service-worker customer orientation on perceived job fit, job satisfaction, commitment to the firm and organizational citizenship behaviors. Data were collected from employees of two separate service industries – the financial service and food services

## The mediating role of service quality



**Figure 1.**  
Theoretical framework

industry. The result indicated that the positive influence of customer orientation on certain job responses was stronger for service workers who spend more time in direct contact with customers than for workers who spend less time with customers. The challenges of the Donovan *et al.*'s (2004) study in relation to the current study is not significantly different from the Kelley (1992) study. This is because Donovan *et al.* also did not test their model from the customers' point of view and also did not consider the role that service quality could play.

Hennig-Thurau (2004) on the other hand investigated the impact of employees' customer orientation on customer satisfaction and retention. The study was empirically tested on a sample of 989 for two service contexts. The result of the study supported most of the hypotheses. The challenge with the study is transferability which the study alluded to by stating that though the study was conducted in Germany, it will be difficult to transfer the result of the study into other cultural regions such as USA, Africa and for that matter Ghana. The study therefore suggested that a similar study could be done outside of Germany. The study considered key services marketing constructs, however it failed to account for the role of perceived service quality. This notwithstanding, service quality is a key services marketing construct which could significantly influence the relationships between employees' customer orientation, customer satisfaction, commitment and retention. Conducting the study in Ghana is also important, considering the power challenges facing the country, leading to the infamous term "dumsor." Hence, the need for the current study to assess the mediating role of service quality between employees' customer orientation and customer satisfaction relationship.

Korunka *et al.* (2007) in attempt to measure employees' customer orientation in the public sector, developed a short scale to measure perceived customer orientation among service employees. The study was a longitudinal studies carried out in two separate countries to analyze the changes in customer orientation as a result of new public management. Customer orientation was revealed to increase in both organizations. Perceived customer orientation was found to be related to job characteristics, organizational characteristics and employee quality of working life. Though this study was done in the public sector organizations, they only measured customer orientation from the employees' perspectives. The study also did not look at the relationship of the customer orientation with the other key services marketing constructs which the current study seeks to investigate.

### *2.2 Employees' customer orientation conceptualization*

Different measures have been propounded in assessing the customer orientation construct. In the larger market orientation construct, measures such as institutional customer orientation and employee-related customer orientation were identified. The employee-related customer orientation which is termed as COSE has been used by scholars such as Hennig-Thurau (2004), Donovan *et al.* (2004), Hennig-Thurau and Thurau (2003) and Brown *et al.* (2002). The COSE was classified into two dimensions by Brown *et al.* (2002) – thus first, the efficacy of the service employees to meet the needs and expectations of customers and second, the fulfillment that the employee derives from having an interaction with the customer. Donovan *et al.* (2004) later used Brown *et al.*'s (2002) dimensions to come out with their definition of COSE. Since Brown *et al.* (2002) did not give any justification for their two dimensions of the construct as stated by Hennig-Thurau (2004), Hennig-Thurau and Thurau (2003) also came out with three dimensions namely; customer oriented skills of employees, employees' motivation to serve customers and finally employees' perceived decision-making authority. Another scale which is used in measuring market orientation (MARKOR) emphasizes on gathering market intelligence regarding customer needs and expectation, the distribution of those information gathered and the responsiveness to those information, by using 32 items (Bruhn, 1999; Kohli *et al.*, 1993). In total, 14 items used in the MKTOR scale were also used in measuring the components such as customer orientation, competitor

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orientation and inter-functional coordination. Narver and Slater (1990) in designing their scale also considered the organizational culture. They therefore see customer orientation as an area of corporate culture that enhances customers' gains leading to better organizational performance (Korunka *et al.*, 2007).

Saxe and Weitz (1982) in assessing the employees' customer orientation culture also propounded the selling orientation and customer orientation scale, and adopted by researchers like Brown *et al.* (2002) and Boles *et al.* (2001). This is made up of 24 items with components such as customer orientation being assessed by 12 positive items while selling orientation being assessed using 12 negative items. This scale was basically designed to assess the customer orientation culture of employees and how in the long term it leads to an improvement in customer satisfaction (Brown *et al.*, 2002). Though the customer orientation was originally proposed to measure the construct from employees' point of view, Brady and Cronin (2001) later measure customer orientation from the customers' point of view.

### *2.3 Employees' customer orientation and service quality*

It has been well-established in service quality literature that the perception of customer about the service they received is influenced by the behavior of the service employees (Johnston, 1995; Bitner *et al.*, 1990). Scholars have established that the behavior of service employees affect the quality of service delivered to customers. Three dimensions of the SERVQUAL model (i.e. responsiveness, assurance and empathy) out of the five proposed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) were identified to be related explicitly or implicitly with the behavior of service employees (as suggested by Hennig-Thurau, 2004). A company that tends to practice the culture of customer orientation is well placed to fully comprehend the customers' needs and wants which leads to the delivery of better quality service, and eventually better company performance. Service firms with high employees' customer orientation are more likely to deliver effective services that positively influence customers' perceived service quality of the firm (Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Rathmell, 1966; Brady and Cronin, 2001). We therefore hypothesize that:

*H1.* Employees' customer orientation has a positive effect on perceived service quality among SMEs.

### *2.4 Perceived service quality and customer satisfaction*

Service quality has enjoyed extensive consideration in the services marketing literature. Similarly, customer satisfaction which is about customers' assessment of the supposed incongruity between the expectation of customers and the actual service delivered, have also enjoyed massive review in the marketing literature (Tse and Wilton, 1988). Recently, these two constructs (service quality and customer satisfaction) have received much consideration in academia (Bamfo, Dogbe, and Osei-Wusu, 2018; Peng and Moghavi, 2015; Navaratnaseel and Periyathampy, 2014; Karim and Chowdhury, 2014; Lau *et al.*, 2013; El Saghier and Nathan, 2013; Munusamy *et al.*, 2010). Wilson *et al.* (2012) stated that meeting customers' expectation or otherwise, gives customers the basis to assess service delivery of the firm. They therefore stated that the determinant of customer satisfaction is service quality. Cronin and Taylor (1992) further asserted that better perceived service quality will result in better customer satisfaction in any service organizations (as supported by George and Kumar, 2014; Ennew *et al.*, 2013; Siddiqi, 2011). In the public service sector, this relationship is also expected to exist, and therefore we hypothesize that:

*H2.* Perceived service quality has a positive effect on customer satisfaction among SMEs.

### *2.5 Employees' customer orientation and customer satisfaction*

Before patronizing service, customers usually have some expectations of service which they desire them met after service consumption. To meet these expectations, firms are expected

to put customers at the heart of service delivery. Firms that put customers first are said to be customer oriented. Since most services are co-produced or have concurrent production and consumption, there remain a high contact between service employees and customers. The attitude of service employees therefore has a great influence on customer satisfaction. When the performance of the service employees exceeds customer expectation, the customer is deemed to be satisfied. In the context of service delivery, employees' customer orientation is about employees' appreciation of the service needs of customers and how these needs are effectively satisfied (Brown *et al.*, 2002). On the other hand, customer satisfaction as defined by Tse and Wilton (1988, p. 204) is "customer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectation and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption." These two constructs (employees' customer orientation and customer satisfaction) have enjoyed reviews in the services marketing literature and some scholars like Reynierse and Harker (1992) and Hennig-Thurau (2004) have proven that there is a direct and indirect significant relationship between employees' customer orientation and the satisfaction of customers. We therefore hypothesize that:

- H3. Employees' customer orientation has a positive effect on customer satisfaction among SMEs.
- H4. Perceived service quality mediates the effect of employees' customer orientation on customer satisfaction among SMEs.

### 3. Methods

The variables for this study are customer orientation, service quality and customer satisfaction. The study adopts a survey approach, by studying SMEs in Greater Accra region of Ghana. SMEs in Greater Accra region therefore represent the population for this study. The exact number of SMEs could not be ascertained, and that was a key limitation in determining the sample size. An estimated population of 10,000,000, with 95 percent confidence level and a 5 percent margin of error, will however give a sample size of 384 (Kirby *et al.*, 2002). The targeted sample size was therefore 384, however, 350 SMEs fully completed the research instrument within the period of data collection. This gave a response rate of 91.15 percent, which the researchers deemed reliable for the study.

First and foremost, the list of registered firms with contacts was obtained from The Registrar General's Department in Greater Accra region. The firms which had their operations within the region were contacted through e-mail and phone, although it was realized that numerous registered firms were just ghost. After which a meeting was scheduled, where trained field assistants were tasked to attend and arrange for the data collection. When necessary, the researchers themselves made an appearance.

Two non-probability sampling techniques were used in the study, which were convenience and purposive sampling techniques. With convenience sampling technique, SMEs which were available and ready to partake in the research were targeted; and with purposive sampling, firms selected had employees of less than 100 as defined by National Board for Small Scale Industries (NBSSI) in Ghana (Saunders *et al.*, 2009).

There are a number of definitions of SMEs, however, this study adopts that of NBSSI in Ghana. The NBSSI applied both the "fixed asset and number of employees" criteria, however, this study only considered the number of employees. The number of employees' criteria was chosen because that was readily available, unlike the value of fixed assets. According to National Board for Small Scale Industries' (NBSSI) (1990), Micro enterprise has less than five employees; Small enterprise has 6–29 employees; and Medium enterprise has 30–99 employees. This study sampled firms with no more than 99 employees. One respondent was selected from each of the firms, and they were either owner-managers or employee-managers. Owner-managers and employee-managers were selected because of

their in-depth knowledge on the affairs of their firms, and the ability to offer a more reliable information toward the study. And some previous studies that studied SMEs sampled owner-managers and employee-managers to respond to their research instruments (e.g. MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012; Acosta *et al.*, 2018).

The data collection was through the administration of structured questionnaire by trained field assistants. After the data collection process, the researchers selected some SMEs at random, and contacted them to be sure they actually partook in the study. And the outcomes were positive. The observed items for the various constructs used in the study were developed from some previous works, that is, Tseng (2018), Korunka *et al.* (2007), Macintosh (2007) and Andreassen (1994). The observed items measuring the three constructs, that is, employees' customer orientation, service quality and customer satisfaction, were responded to on a Likert scale of 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-indifferent, 4-agree and 5-strongly agree.

The SMEs sampled for the study came from different sectors of the economy, like education, manufacturing, commerce, etc. And most of them were either limited liability firms or sole proprietorship. Few of the firms however, were partnership. The firms selected have operated for at least five years, this was to make sure they have had much encounter with the electricity service provider, so as to reliably respond to the research instrument.

STATA software was used in the data analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the observed items measuring the latent variables, after which the structural equation model (SEM) was estimated. After the extraction, employees' customer orientation had four observed variables retained, service quality had four and customer satisfaction also had six retained. Direct and indirect effect was conducted to ascertain the mediating role of service quality. Sobel's test was also further conducted to test the mediating role.

### 3.1 Reliability and validity analysis

This section presents the CFA, after the various items that loaded poorly were deleted, as suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (2012). From Table I, employees' customer orientation had 4 retained items, with the least factor loading of 0.692. As suggested by literature, factor loading of at least 0.5 is considered reliable (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012). Service quality had four retained items with least factor loading of 0.570. Finally, customer satisfaction also had six retained items with least factor loading of 0.670.

As indicated by Brown (2006), Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (CA) score of at least 0.7 is considered reliable. From the analysis presented, employees' customer orientation had the least  $\alpha$  score of 0.782. Employees' customer orientation also had the least composite reliability (CR) score of 0.810. Making decision based on CA and CR, the three constructs in this study were reliably measured. As proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), average variance extracted (AVE) score greater than 0.5 is an indication of convergent validity. The analysis presented indicates all constructs had an AVE greater than 0.5, indicating a high convergent validity (Table I).

In running a CFA, another indication to look out for is the goodness of fit indices. Under this, the  $\chi^2$  is expected to be statistically insignificant at 5 percent level of confidence, and  $\chi^2$  divided by degree of freedom (df) is also expected to be less than two (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Newsom, 2012). As could be seen from the analysis presented,  $\chi^2$  for all three constructs were statistically insignificant, and  $\chi^2/df$  for all constructs were less than 2. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) are expected to be less than 0.08 (Brown, 2006; Kline, 2005), which was achieved for all dimensions. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker – Lewis Index (TLI) are also expected to be above 0.95 (Brown, 2006; Kline, 2005), and these thresholds were also met for all dimensions studied. Meeting all these assumptions therefore point out that the constructs are fit for model estimation. The coefficient of determination (CD) for all the constructs was at least 0.8, indicating observed items explained at least 80 percent of the latent variables they measured.



**Table I.**  
Confirmatory factor  
analysis

Variables	Factor loadings	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	CD
<i>Employees' customer orientation (CO): CA = 0.782; CR = 0.810; AVE = 0.517</i>										
ECG employees are highly competent (co1)	0.692									
ECG employees consider their customers' perspective (co2)	0.697									
ECG employees exhibit strong commitment to their job (co3)	0.780									
ECG employees attend to our needs without seeking their superior's permission (co4)	0.703									
<i>Service quality (SQ): CA = 0.860; CR = 0.870; AVE = 0.631</i>										
My electric power supplier is very responsive when called upon (sq1)	0.570									
My electric power supplier always provides information regarding service consumption and charges (sq2)	0.886									
Staff of my electric power supplier are very competent in the delivery of service (sq3)	0.796									
Staff of my electric power supplier are very accessible when they are needed (sq4)	0.885									
<i>Customer satisfaction (CS): CA = 0.874; CR = 0.877; AVE = 0.543</i>										
Electric power supplier provides satisfactory service (cs1)	0.757									
Electric power supplier meets the electric power expectations of my firm (cs2)	0.774									
My firm is satisfied with the services of my electric power supplier (cs3)	0.694									
My firm is satisfied with the service charge of power supply (cs4)	0.799									
My firm is satisfied with the general power supply (cs5)	0.670									
My firm is satisfied with the overall service quality of our electric power supplier (cs6)	0.719									
Variables	$\chi^2$									
CO	0.31	2	0.856	0.155	0.000	1.000	1.011	0.004	0.800	
SQ	3.62	2	0.199	1.81	0.055	0.997	0.991	0.010	0.904	
CS	7.30	9	0.606	0.811	0.000	1.000	1.003	0.012	0.881	

Another important assumption to consider in model estimation is discriminant validity, that is, the extent of independence of each of the construct. If observed items truly measured their respective constructs, discriminant validity would be achieved. The discriminant validity in this study was checked by matching the correlation coefficients with the square root of AVE ( $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ ), as was done in previous studies like Bamfo, Dogbe, and Mingle (2018). For a convergent validity to be achieved, the  $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$  is expected to be greater than the correlations coefficients in that column. The analysis presented in Table II indicates all  $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$  were greater than their corresponding coefficients in their columns, and therefore concluded that discriminant validity is achieved for dimensions studied. The observed items distinctively measured the constructs they were expected to measure.

The mediating  
role of service  
quality

#### 4. Results and discussions

The first hypothesis stated that employees' customer orientation had a significant effect on perceived service quality of ECG's commercial customers (SMEs). The analysis presented indicated a positive and statistically significant effect of employees' customer orientation in the utility sector of Ghana (Table III and Figure 2). As ECG takes into consideration the needs of SMEs who are customers, prices and services would be provided to meet the specific needs of SMEs. In periods of load shedding, which is a common practice in Ghana (Boateng, 2014), communities that serve as a hub for business are normally given some priority, by offering them more hours of power supply, as compared to household consumers. Putting the SMEs first in such cases therefore influence their perception of service quality of ECG. Serving SMEs with reliable services helps boost their businesses, and that influences their satisfaction toward service provider, as suggested by Chodzaza and Gombachika (2013). As indicated by Drury (2000), employees' customer orientation forms part of the broader service quality concept, and not surprising its effect on service quality was significant in this study. A company that tends to practice the culture of customer orientation is well placed to fully comprehend the customers' needs and wants which will lead to delivery of better quality service. Brady and Cronin Jr (2001) for example stated that customer orientation has a significant effect on perceived service quality.

The second hypothesis also established that perceived service quality has a significant effect on SMEs' satisfaction toward services provided by the employees of ECG. In other words, does SMEs' perception of ECG employees' service delivery influence their satisfaction toward ECG service? The analysis further showed a positive and statistically

Variables	1	2	3
Employees' customer orientation (1)	0.719		
Service quality (2)	0.608**	0.794	
Customer satisfaction (3)	0.649**	0.641**	0.737

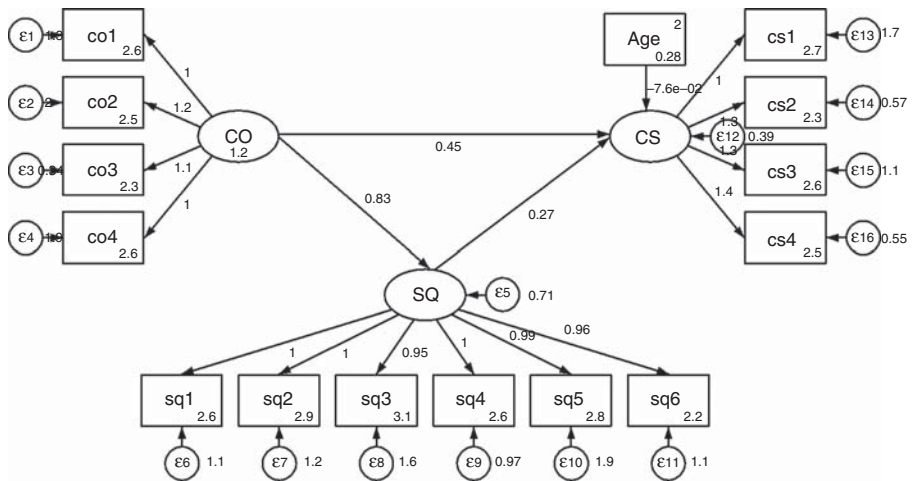
**Notes:** Square root (AVE) on the diagonal and construct correlations below the diagonal. \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed)

**Table II.**  
Discriminant validity

Hypotheses	Estimates	OIM SE	z-score	Results
H1: Employees' customer orientation → Service quality	0.828	0.076	10.91**	Supported
H2: Service quality → Customer satisfaction	0.272	0.057	4.79**	Supported
H3: Employees' customer orientation → Customer satisfaction	0.452	0.084	5.40**	Supported
Age of firm → Customer satisfaction	-0.076	0.069	-1.11	Not supported

**Note:** \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table III.**  
Structural path  
estimation



**Figure 2.**  
Structural  
equation model

significant effect of perceived service quality on customer satisfaction in the utility sector of Ghana. This relationship has been well-established in literature relating to other sectors. Bamfo, Dogbe, and Osei-Wusu (2018) found service quality to significantly influence customer satisfaction in the banking industry. Wilson *et al.* (2012) identified perceived service quality as a determinant of customer satisfaction.

The third hypothesis of this study stated that employees' customer orientation has a significant effect on SMEs' satisfaction toward the consumption of electricity from ECG. Results indicated that, employees' customer orientation had a positive effect on SMEs satisfaction toward electricity consumption from ECG. This effect was statistically significant at 5 percent. Despite ECG being a monopoly in the Southern Ghana, their level of employees' customer orientation significantly affects SMEs satisfaction toward the consumption of electricity in Ghana. The demonstration of a good understanding of SMEs' electric power need by ECG, and a listening ear to the suggestions and complaints of SMEs, positively affect SMEs' satisfaction. The marketing mantra "Customer is the King" is normally experienced effectively in a competitive environment (Bamfo, Dogbe and Mingle, 2018). This is because many service suppliers compete for same customer, and customers have the luxury to switch service providers. In the monopolistic environment where there are no competitors however, customer orientation efforts are less emphasized (Akinboade *et al.*, 2012). In the case of Ghana for example, the alternative to electricity from ECG is by using plants, which is costlier to use because of the high fuel price (Boateng, 2014). This notwithstanding, there exist a positive effect of employees' customer orientation on SMEs' satisfaction in the electric power sector (which is a public institution operating as a monopoly).

The age of the SMEs which also positively relates the length of time as ECG customer, was controlled for in this study. The study assumed that the number of years SMEs have been in operation, and their experience with the services of ECG, could influence their level of satisfaction. The analysis as presented however indicates that, age of SMEs had no significant effect on customer satisfaction.

The last hypothesis considered the mediating role of service quality on the effect employees' customer orientation has on customer satisfaction in the utility sector of Ghana. The results as presented in Table IV indicate that, there was a significant and direct effect of employees' customer orientation on customer satisfaction in the utility sector of Ghana. The indirect effect (i.e. passing through service quality), was also statistically significant. In similar manner, the total effect was also statistically significant. As indicated by Baron and

Kenny (1986), there is partial mediation when both direct and indirect effects are statistically significant. The Sobel's test which considers both the coefficients and the standard errors of the indirect relationships, was also conducted. The result was also significant, further proving that perceived service quality significantly mediated employees' customer orientation and customer satisfaction. Based on Baron and Kenny (1986) and Sobel's test, it was concluded that perceived service quality has a partial mediating effect on the relationship between employees' customer orientation and customer satisfaction of SMEs toward services provided by the ECG staff. Figure 2 also presented the diagrammatic form of the SEM among the variables studied.

## 5. Conclusions

The study concludes that even in the public sector where organizations usually have a built-in customer base, employees' customer orientation has a positive and significant effect on service quality and customer satisfaction. Perceived service quality also had a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction, thereby serving as a mediating variable. These relationships were true even for commercial customers, as this study focused on SMEs.

## 6. Practical implications

Public sector institutions, which normally enjoys some monopoly depending on the sector, should therefore put customers first in their operations. This is much more crucial for commercial customers like SMEs, who serve as a drive for the economic growth of an economy. When SMEs are satisfied with power supply, their productivity is likely to improve, which cumulatively helps in the entire economic growth of the nation. For example, if employees of power firms are responsive to the calls of SMEs as customers, when there are electrical faults or breaks, there will be smooth production. Irresponsiveness on the part of the employees of electric power supplier could however delay operational activities of the SMEs, thereby reducing their productivity over time.

Although this study focused on electric power sector, other public institutions should also pursue customer orientation. Institutions like the Registrar General Department, Ghana Water Company Ltd, Ghana Revenue Authority, NBSSI, Food and Drugs Authority, etc. The activities of these public institutions directly affects the operations of SMEs. For example, pursuing employees' customer orientation at the Registrar General Department would help smoothen the business registration process in the country, thereby boosting SMEs. By getting business registered promptly too, firms could be easily tracked for the purposes of tax, which also increases the revenue of the country. Employees' customer orientation is thus not just relevant in the power sector, but in all government institutions.

## 7. Theoretical implications

This study made three academic contributions. First, it pointed out that employees' customer orientation behaviors of public institutions have an influence on customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction. Previous studies on these concepts have largely focused on the private sector, where there are lots of competition. Second, prior studies in the utility sector have paid less attention to customer centered dimensions like customer

Path	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	$R^2$	Sobel test	Results
H4: Employees' customer orientation → Service quality → Customer satisfaction	0.451**	0.225**	0.677**	0.858	4.383**	Partial mediation

**Note:** \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table IV.**  
Mediation analysis

orientation and satisfaction. This study boosts literature in that regard. Lastly, this study specifically studied commercial customers (SMEs) of public institution, which is quite novel, especially in relation to the concepts studied. And the contribution of SMEs to economic growth makes their study even much more important.

## 8. Limitations and direction for future research

Just as in any other research, this study is not without some limitations. One limitation is the selection of owner-managers and employee-managers for the study, as this could potentially lead to common method variance (CMV) as indicated by MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012) and Acosta *et al.* (2018). The use of CFA was meant to address limitations like CMV, and improve the reliability and validity of the results.

This study is a snapshot of information analyzed within a specific period, which could influence the reliability in generalizing the results of the study. The economic characteristics in Greater Accra region would also not be same as other parts of the country. Interpretations and applications of results should take into consideration the settings of this current study.

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