

CORPORATE IMAGE OF GHANAIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT: *The objectives of the study were to establish (i) the relationship between perceived service quality and corporate image of Ghanaian universities. (ii) The relationship between corporate image and perceived service quality, students' service quality expectation and experience. Corporate image as a function of the three (3) latent variables of the study framework was evaluated using 15 item scale. The five main latent variables that measure the corporate image of tertiary institutions in Ghana include employment opportunities, referrals, lecturers' reputation, academic and research records, and physical facilities. These variables were initially piloted on some randomly selected MBA students of Methodist University. The pilot study revealed that these variables were relevant to the operationalization of the corporate image concept. The analysed data was randomly collected from 500 students from five different universities in Ghana. The Pearson r was used as the statistical tool to test for the linear relationship between perceived service quality and corporate image of Ghanaian universities. This was found appropriate because of its parametric strength in data analysis. The result shows that the linear relationship between students' perceived service quality and the image of a university is strong and significant ($P < 0.004$). However, none of the three variables could significantly explain the corporate image of a Ghanaian University independently. In other words, corporate image of a Ghanaian University could be defined by the combined effect of perceived service quality, students' expectations and experiences of service quality.*

KEYWORDS: Corporate Image, Perceived Service Quality, Students' Experience, Students' Expectations, Ghanaian Universities.

INTRODUCTION

Customer Perceived Service Quality

The importance of corporate image to the success of an organisation has been documented in many studies. Existing marketing literature stipulate that service encounter is a very important concept in service quality research field (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Dale, 2003; Douglas et al 2008). It is seen as the building block for customer perceptions (Zeithaml et al. 2006). Also known as 'real-time marketing' or 'moments of truth', it involves direct interaction between the service provider and the service customer (Douglas et al. 2008) and provides the service firms the opportunity to keep or break the promises made in its communication activities (Zeithaml et al. 2006). Customers form and build their perceptions from the results of the interactions in a service encounter (Zeithaml et al. 2006; Svensson, 2003).

Service marketing literature recognize that every interaction in a service encounter influences the customers overall impression and evaluation of the service (Dale, 2003; Sherry et al., 2004; Zeithaml et al. 2006; Douglas et al. 2008). Positive experiences received in a service encounter results in a composite image of high service quality. On the other hand, negative interactions will communicate unfavourable signal of low service quality. However, inconsistencies in

service delivery resulting from a variety of service experience (either positive or negative) could confuse the customer who may have doubts about the service firm and be unsure of future expectations (Zeithaml et al. 2006). Thus customer perception about service quality is more complicated than just considering only the service experiences of the quality dimensions that determine whether the service quality is perceived to be good, bad or neutral (Hirvonen, 2007). Research studies carried out in this area suggest that customer perceive service quality is good when the quality of the service encountered meets or exceeds the expected service quality (Grönroos, 2000; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Zeithaml et al. 2006; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007; Hirvonen, 2007). Zeithaml et al., (1990; 2001; 2006) defined perceived service quality as the extent of discrepancy between customers' expectations or desires and their perceptions. In this regard, the customer's experience in a service encounter is very important to customer perception of service quality.

Corporate Image

Gummesson emphasized the importance of corporate image in the service quality experience, similar to the idea proposed by Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) and Grönroos (1982; 1984). Customers bring their past experiences and overall perceptions of a service firm to each encounter because customers often have continuous contacts with the same service firm (Grönroos, 2001; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Zeithaml et al. 2006; Kang and James, 2004). Therefore, the image concept was introduced as an important component in the 4Q model, to reinforce customer perceived quality, expectations and experiences. There are different levels of image; brand image, product image and corporate image. These are interrelated because the overall image influences customer perception, expectations and experiences before, during and after a service encounter.

Hirvonen (2007) identified four roles that image play in influencing customer perceptions about service quality. First and foremost, together with a firm's external communication efforts (word-of-mouth communication) image communicates customer expectations. A positive image makes it easier for a firm to communicate effectively and also to benefit from positive word-of-mouth communication from satisfied customers. On the other hand, a negative image can lead to unfavourable word-of-mouth communication.

Secondly, image acts as a filter through which both the technical quality and functional quality can be seen. This function influences customer perception of company performance. A favourable and well-known image is an asset to a firm because image has an impact on customer perceptions of the communication and operations of the firm in many respects. If a service provider has a positive image in the minds of customers, minor mistakes will be forgiven. If mistakes often occur, however, the image will be damaged. If a provider's image is negative, the impact of any mistake will often be magnified in the consumer's mind. Thus a positive image becomes a shelter and minor mistakes/problems are overlooked for a period of time. A bad image however will lead to customer dissatisfaction with a bad service (Hirvonen, 2007; Kang and James, 2004).

Furthermore, image has internal implications on employees which can also affect external customers. If employees are not sure of the overall corporate image, it may affect their attitudes and performance levels. This may consequently influence the relationship that exists between employees and customers and customer's perception of service quality (Grönroos, 2000; Hirvonen, 2007). Finally, image is a function of customer expectations and experiences. When customers develop their expectations through external communications of a service firm, and

experience the true service in an encounter, the resulting perceived service quality may bring a change in the image. If expectation is below perceived service quality, a positive and favourable image will be formed in the minds of customers. If on the other hand customer perceived quality is below expectations, the opposite effect will result (Hirvonen, 2007; Kang and James, 2004).

Corporate Image of Universities

The importance of corporate image has gained interests in service quality literature (Hirvonen, 2007; Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1993; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982). Image of universities as a component of the ISQ model (See conceptual framework) is important in view of its influence on customers' perceptions, expectations and experiences (Kang and James, 2004; Zeithaml et al., 2006; Stromgren, 2007). Delivering service 'right' the first time creates a lasting positive image in the minds of customers (Zeithaml et al. 2000; 2006). On the other hand poor service experiences are likely to create negative impression about the service provider and consequently affect future expectations of service quality (Kang and James, 2004; Stromgren, 2007). Thus, the image of universities forms a very significant component of the conceptual framework due to its influence of customers' (students') perceived service quality, expectations and experiences (see figure 2; page 51). Corporate image of universities is described as the outcome of service quality. Kayhko (2003) cited in Hirvonen (2007) stipulates that image can impact on the individual student, the educational institution delivery the service as well as society, nation and other nations that stands to benefit from the products of tertiary institutions.

Students' Perceived Service Quality

Another important component of the ISQ model is perceived service quality which has been defined in literature as the discrepancy between customer expectations and their perceptions (Zeithaml et al., 2006). In a review of quality education literature, researchers conceptually divided perceived service quality into two elements: "hard ware and human ware" (Martensen, et al., 2000). The hard ware component is described as the quality of non-human elements involved in service delivery. This dimension is associated with the quality of service attributes; i.e. the service environment and the physical facilities involved in delivering quality service to customers. These include study programmes and courses, support functions such as classroom environment and equipments, library facilities, computer and internet facilities, as well as teaching and learning materials. On the other hand, the human ware constitutes the human elements. It represents the factors that enhance the quality of students' interactions with a service provider during a service encounter. These factors were identified to include academic standards, pedagogical methods, and personal contacts with academic and administrative staff (ibid). These variables to a large extent influence students' expectations and experiences of service quality (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Oldfield and Baron, 2000) as well as the image of a tertiary institution (Hirvonen, 2007). The interrelationships between students' perceived service quality, and students' expectations, experiences and image of universities as shown in figure 2 is critical to service quality delivery ((Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Hirvonen, 2007).

Corporate Image and Students' Perceived Service Quality

Researchers have identified corporate image as one of the important issues in service marketing (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982) and Grönroos, 1982; 1984; Gummesson, 1993; Hirvonen,

2007). Corporate image has been described as the value customers groups connect with an organization (Hirvonen, 2007). The corporate image of a tertiary institution is what and how students perceive that particular institute (Combrick, 2006). In view of the intangible nature of services, knowledge and understanding of how the image of a service organization relate to quality has become very important. Corporate image is an important indicator of service quality which if managed well, can have a positive impact on how students perceived service quality. In this regard, the ISQ Framework suggests that corporate image of the sampled universities relates to how students' perceive service quality. Thus, the ISQ Framework suggests that corporate image could be influenced by student expectations of service. If a service firm projects a positive image among its publics, it makes it easier to communicate effectively and also the firm stands to benefit from word-of-mouth (W.O.M.) communication. Research findings in this area of study suggest that corporate image of a service organisation could be affected by other service quality dimensions as presented in the ISQ Framework (expectations, perceived service quality, and experience).

Corporate image can be enhanced by customers' experiences and perceptions. If the actual service delivered meets or exceeds customer expectations, the customer is delighted. This will affect the corporate image positively. A satisfied customer is likely to form a positive 'composite image' about service organization that delivers excellent services. On the other hand, if the services delivered are below what was promised, it will lead to customer dissatisfaction. Consequently, the customer will form a negative impression about the service quality. If this happens, the customer is likely to perceive service quality to be poor. This could have a negative impact on the image of the service organization delivering the service Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Finally, image has internal marketing implications. When a service firm enjoys a favourable image from customers, it changes the behaviour and attitude of its employees. This may increase the performance levels of employees as they work towards achieving customer satisfaction. As a result the existing relationships between employees and customers may be strengthened. Corporate image is not just about customer's overall impressions of service quality communicated during a service encounter, it also constitute business name, reputation, ideology, and variety of services delivered to meet customer satisfaction (Solomon et al., 1985; Combrick, 2006). Thus corporate image does not only function as a filter but also acts as a perspective that affects students perceived service quality.

Research Gaps

In the past decades when Ghana had only 3 public Universities, Corporate Image as an issue for topical discussion was missing in business and academic research because at the time the demand for University education far outnumbered supply. This made the Universities to focused more attention on the performance of students as against their Corporate Image as a way of attracting students. Literally prospective students had no choice. Today with the emergence of public universities in all the 10 regions of Ghana coupled with the emergence of private universities, the conversion of polytechnics HND awarding institutions into technical universities, the entrance of foreign universities in Ghana and the availability of distance and on-line degree awarding universities; both local and foreign, competition for students is now very keen and on the top of agenda for the Ghanaian universities.

The power of rejection of students that hitherto was in the hands of the few public universities has shifted to students giving them the power to reject university admission offers which was unheard of in the past.

Bevans-Gonzles and Nair (2004), suggests that in view of the rising pressures from different stakeholders for quality education and services; depleting resources and increasing competition for attracting excellent students and high performance faculty and staff, higher education institutions find themselves in the tight corner to adopt customer-focused and market driven approach and improve their overall performance.

In a recent study, Tutu-Boahene and Akwensivie (2014), in examining the service experience perspectives in Ghanaian private universities also established that students in Ghanaian private universities use functional and technical dimensions of service quality in evaluating their experiences at the tertiary level. Thus advised their managers to reckon the importance of the 4 service quality indicators; input, output, interactive and process qualities and make conscious efforts to enhance them at all contact points if quality experience is to be delivered to private university students.

Research objectives and questions

On the basis of these research gaps, this current study was instituted to achieve the following aim and objectives:

1. The relationship between perceived service quality and corporate image of Ghanaian universities.
2. The relationship between corporate image and perceived service quality, students' service quality expectation and experience

In order to investigate the above stated research objectives, the researchers needed to provide answers to this critical research question;

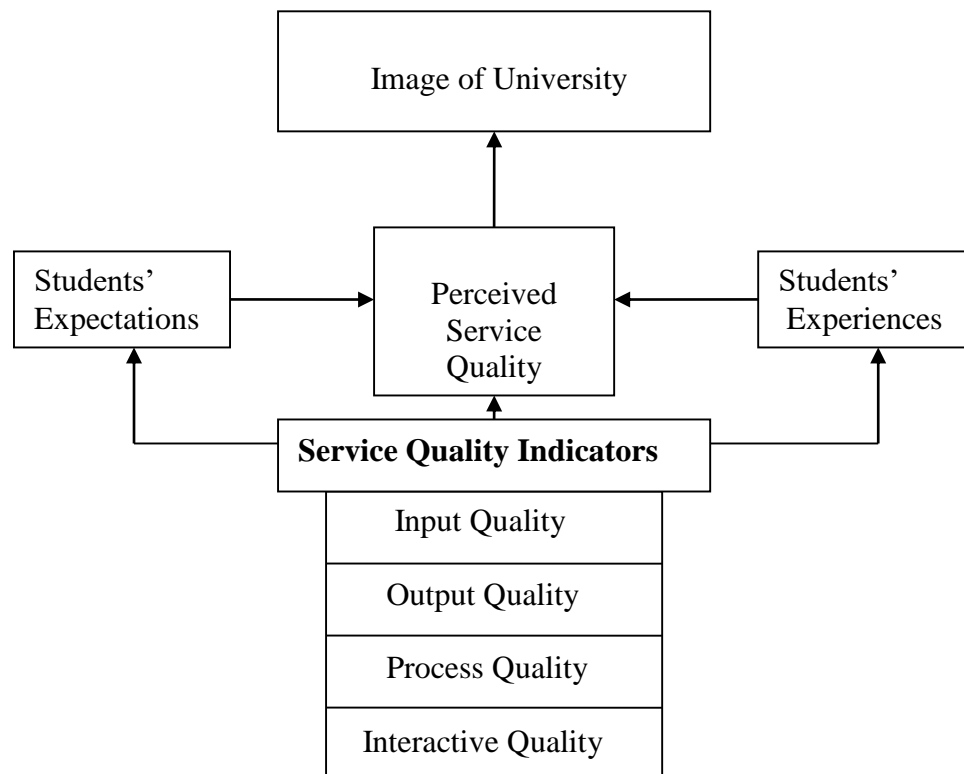
1. To what extent does the image of Ghanaian universities impact on students' perceived service quality?
2. What are the effects of students' perceived service quality on the corporate image of universities in Ghana?

METHODOLOGY

Image as a function of the three (3) latent variables of the framework was evaluated using 15 item scale. With regards to perceived corporate image, the study developed all the 15 item scales from literature relevant to the current study. Thus, the item scales generated for the measurement of perceived corporate image are based on the findings of existing literature (e.g. Martensen et al., 2000; Pereda et al., 2007; Hirvonen, 2007). The measurement variables were split into employment opportunities for students, students' referrals, reputation of lecturers, academic and research records and facilities. The initial pilot study conducted among a group of Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students of Methodist University selected randomly revealed that these variables were relevant to the operationalization of the corporate image concept in the current study. In this regard, the five main latent variables that measure

the corporate image of tertiary institutions in Ghana include employment opportunities, referrals, lecturers' reputation, academic and research records, and physical facilities. The analysed data was randomly collected from 500 students from five different universities in Ghana. The Pearson r was used as the statistical tool to test for the linear relationship between perceived service quality and corporate image of Ghanaian universities

Conceptual framework: Integrated Service Quality Model (ISQ)



RESULTS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Students' perceived service quality and corporate image

The researchers assumed as hypothesized that there is a strong link between what customers perceive to be service quality and the image of a service firm. In this study, the intention was to find out a linear effect or relationship between perceived service quality of Ghanaian universities and the corporate image of these universities. In other words to what extent the image of Ghanaian universities impact on students' does perceived service quality? Strong positive linear relationship would mean that the two variables co-vary or rise and fall together. Thus, the two variables (perceived service quality and corporate image of a university) correlate positively. In simple terms as the customer (students) perceive service quality to be high, the corporate image of that particular university is likely to be high. The Pearson r was used as the statistical tool to test for the linear relationship between perceived service quality and corporate image of Ghanaian universities. This was found appropriate because of its parametric strength in data analysis. The results are summarized in Table 1.0 below.

Table 1.0 Pearson r Results between Perceived Service and Corporate Image

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>r</i>	<i>P</i>
Corporate Image	4863.80	3840.55	0.977	0.004
Perceived Service Quality	10748.20	6800.75		

 $P = 0.004 < 0.05$

Source: Survey Data

The results of the table 1.0 above ($r = 0.977$, $N = 500$, $P = 0.004 < 0.05$) indicates that there is a positive correlation coefficient (0.977) between the two variables. This shows that the linear relationship between students' perceived service quality and the image of a university is strong and significant ($P < 0.004$). Judging from Bluman (2004) interpretation of correlation coefficient *r*-values, the relationship between the two variables is very strong. This shows that the current finding confirms that there is a strong relationship between perceived service quality and corporate image.

The positive correlation between the corporate image and perceived service quality, points to the fact that a positive perception of service quality will have a positive effect on the image of Ghanaian universities. On the other hand, a negative perception formed as a result of a poor service experience will have a negative impact on the corporate image of a university. Thus the image of Ghanaian universities may be affected by how students perceive the quality of services delivered by the university. The finding suggests that there are universities in Ghana that have built a positive and favourable image because services delivered to students are perceived to be of high quality. The statistical results indicate that most Masters of Business Administration students consider perceive service quality relevant to the image of their respective institutions. The open-end comments of some Masters of Business Administration students in the sampled universities reinforce the link between students' perceived service quality and corporate image of Ghanaian universities:

“My university is considered as one of the best research institutions in Ghana and Africa. It has earned this reputation over the years as a result of quality research and academic services offered”.

The study discovered that the universities that have developed favourable image are the institutions where students perceive service quality to be high. The result of the current study is in line with earlier research findings that have established a positive relationship between perceived service quality and corporate image (Gummesson, 1993; Grönroos, 1988). For instance the current study confirms the findings of Gummesson's 4Q Model. The model states that customers' perceived service quality influences the corporate image of a firm. Thus the result of the current study is consistent with Gummesson's (1993) research finding which postulates that customer perceived service quality is a function of corporate image. The results imply that, students' perceptions of service quality impact significantly on the corporate image of Ghanaian universities. The study reveals that students who perceive service quality to be high also perceive corporate image of that university as high. Thus, students who perceive service quality of a particular university to be high, rate high the image of that institution.

Relationship between corporate image and perceived service quality, students' service quality expectation and experience

The study tried to establish the relationship between corporate image and the other three variables. More importantly the study seeks to evaluate the individual strength of the three variables (perceived service quality, students' expectations and students' service quality experiences) on the corporate image of Ghanaian universities. Table 2.0(a) shows the correlation r-square value between corporate image and perceived service quality, service quality experience, and service quality expectation.

Table 2.0a: Correlation r-square Value between corporate Image and the three Variables associated with Service Quality

Model	R	R. Square	Adjusted R. Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.994 ^a	.989	.956	809.31645

Source: Survey Data

The table 2.0a above display the first standard part of the regression output. The model summary presents statistical data that measures "goodness of fit". The coefficient of determination is represented in table 2.0a by the value of R-square- r^2 . In this study the results shows that perceived service quality, students' service quality expectation and service quality experience account for 98.9% of variation in corporate image (see table 2.0a). This indicates that the three service quality constructs (students' perceived service quality, students' expectations and students' experiences in a service encounter) to a large extent impact positively on the corporate image of a university. This means that the image of the sampled universities is strongly dependent on students' perceive service quality, their expectations and their experiences in a service encounter. In other words, the image of Ghanaian universities is influenced by students' perceptions, expectations and experiences. Thus any university in Ghana which seeks to build and/or project a positive image should consider students' perceptions, expectations and service quality experiences as important.

Table 2.0b: ANOVA Table showing the Strength of the Relationship between Service Quality Variables

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	58344376	3	19448125.23	29.692	.134 ^a
Residual	654993.1	1	654993.120		
Total	58999369	4			

Source: Survey Data

The ANOVA table shows the statistical significance of the strong relationship displayed on the model summary table. With an F-value of 29.69 and a *P-value* of 0.134 and a degree of freedom of 3, the strong relationship from the model summary table is denied by the F- statistic at a 95% confidence level. This means that the relationship could be due to chance or a third factor

is causing the relationship between dependent and the independent variables. In other words none of the three variables could independently explain corporate image.

Table2.0c: Coefficients of Determination for each of three Independent Variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	β	Std. Error	β		
1. (Constant)	-338.75	1438.88		-235	.853
Overall Perceived Service Quality	.410	.319	.726	1.282	.422
Student Expectations of Service Quality	.079	.146	.295	.545	.683
Student Service Quality Experience	-.032	.079	-.053	-.406	.754

Source: Survey Data

The above algebraic expressions indicate that, perceived service quality explains more of the variation in corporate image of a service firm than expectations and experience of service quality. However, the t-statistic and the associated *P-value* indicate that, none of the three variables could significantly explain the corporate image of a service firms independently. In other words, corporate image of a service firm could be defined by the combined effect of perceived service quality, students' expectations and experiences of service quality.

CONCLUSION

The study argues that a University's ability to meet students' expectations could enhance the image of the University. Therefore managers of universities must focus their attention on building a strong image through activities that meets students' expectations.

Finally, image has internal marketing implications. When a service firm (a university) enjoys a favourable image from customers (students), it changes the behaviour and attitude of its employees. This may increase the performance levels of employees as they work towards achieving customer satisfaction. As a result the existing relationships between employees and customers may be strengthened. Corporate image is not just about customer's overall impressions of service quality communicated during a service encounter, it also constitute business name, reputation, ideology, and variety of services delivered to meet customer satisfaction (Solomon et al., 1985; Combrick, 2006). Thus corporate image does not only function as a filter but also acts as a perspective that affects students perceived service quality.

The current study on the ISQ framework focused on determining the relationship between service experience, perceived service quality and service experience on corporate image. Future study should incorporate the service quality indicators (See Tutu-Boahene and Akwensivie, 2014) as shown in the ISQ framework above to determine the moderating effect of the service quality indicators on corporate image of universities in Ghana.

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APPENDIX 1**List and Categorisation of Universities in Ghana**

Category	Name
Public Universities	University of Ghana
	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
	University of Cape Coast
	University of Education, Winneba
	University for Development Studies
	University of Mines and Technology
	University of Health and Allied Sciences
	University of Energy and Natural Resources
Professional Public Universities & Institutes	Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration
	Ghana Institute of Journalism
	Ghana Armed Forces Command and Staff College
	Ghana Institute of Languages
	Ghana Institute of Surveying and Mapping
	Institution of Local Government Studies
	Kofi Annan International Peace-Keeping Training Centre
	National Film and Television Institute
	University of Professional Studies
Technical Universities	Accra Technical University
	Cape Coast Technical University
	Kumasi Technical University
	Koforidua Technical University
	Tamale Technical University
	Ho Technical University
	Takoradi Technical University
	Sunyani Technical University
Regional Universities	Regional Maritime University
Private Universities	Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture
	Central University
	Valley View University
	Ashesi University
Private University Colleges	Accra Institute of Technology
	African University College of Communication
	Anglican University College of Technology
	Catholic University College of Ghana
	Christian Service University College
	Family Health Medical School
	Good News Theological Seminary

	Islamic University College
	Knutsford University College
	Lancaster University
	Methodist University College Ghana
	Pentecost University College
	Presbyterian University College
	Wisconsin International University College
	Catholic Institute of Business and Technology
	Institute of Accountancy Training
	Narh-Beta School of Nursing
	St. Victor's Seminary
	St. Peter's Seminary
	St. Paul Seminary
	Blue Crest College
	All Nations University College
	KAAF University College
	Radford University College
	Garden City University College
	Regent University College of Science and Technology
	Technical University College
	Spiritan University College
	Data Link University College
	Mountcrest University College
	University College of Agriculture and Environmental Studies
	Entrepreneurship Training Institute
	Delta University College
	Evangelical Presbyterian University College
	Ghana Baptist University College
	Kings University
	Maranatha University College
	Meridian University College
	Perez University College
	Advanced Business University College
	BlueCrest University College
	Jayee University College
	University College of Management Studies
	Ghana Christian University
	Zenith University College
	Ghana Telecom University College
Foreign Universities in Ghana	Webster University
	Sikkim Manipal University
	Lancaster University