


## Article

# Customer Experience Management: A Study of Mechanic versus Humanic Clues and Student Loyalty in Nigerian Higher Education Institution

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**Abstract:** This study surveyed customer experience management (CEM) and student's loyalty in higher education institution (HEI) sector using a private university in Ogun State, Nigeria as a case study. The primary intent of this study was to determine the roles of humanic and mechanic clues on student's loyalty. The two hypotheses formulated to address the research questions and objectives raised in this study were analysed with Categorical Regression, which is also known as CATREG analysis. This study applied survey research design and the data were spawned via designed questionnaire. An overall of 215 copies of the questionnaires were regained from the student of the private university in Ogun State. Multi-stage sampling methods were engaged in this study. The research findings of this study show that mechanic clues significantly influence students' retention, while humanic clues significantly influence students' disposition to endorse the institution of higher education to others. As part of the recommendations of the study, it was suggested that the university management should deliberately focus on mechanic clues in terms of providing a conducive environment, especially one that is clean for its students at all times.

**Keywords:** customer experience management; higher education; humanic clues; mechanic clues; student loyalty



**Citation:** Borishade, T.T.; Worlu, R.; Ogunnaike, O.O.; Aka, D.O.; Dirisu, J.I. Customer Experience Management: A Study of Mechanic versus Humanic Clues and Student Loyalty in Nigerian Higher Education Institution. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 6563. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13126563>

Academic Editors: Changhyun Roh and Edoardo Lozza

Received: 11 April 2021

Accepted: 1 May 2021

Published: 9 June 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Sequel to the development of service epoch, marketing that was recognized basically as tangible goods has now broadened its space to shield all ranges of services. Going by the intense efforts put in by service marketers to certify that services are not just provided, but experienced by the customers, the global economy has authenticated a transformation from a service era to an experience era [1]. The higher education institution is following suit. Currently, the experience element plays an essential part in measuring the achievement of a university offering and the notion of customer experience is a key determinant in nowadays commoditized era [2]. Even though the concept of customer experience management has started to affect marketing practices and academic literature in different industries, it has been neglected by higher education institutions (HEIs) in emerging nations such as Nigeria. Customer experience management is a major strategy that improves connections from students' point of view which will invariably influence student loyalty. Customer Experience Management is the art and science of developing, inventing, observing and handling the general framework of the client [3]. Ref. [4] asserted that outstanding institutions create powerful emotional bonds with their customers. Sustaining an emotional bond entails efficient supervision of the customers' experiences with an institution and its deliveries from the customers' point of views [5]. Marketing in higher education has been suitably recognised. This implies that Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) that want to be at

competitive advantage must be customer focused. However, the issue of students being regarded as customers has generated several intellectual arguments among academics. Many scholars are of the view that students should be regarded as customers [6–9]. In corroboration, this study sees students as customers whose interests should be ‘represented in’ or ‘regarded by’ the management of their university (or HEI). In addition, Ref. [10] maintain that customer satisfaction results to customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction research is centered on anticipating and ascertaining the drivers of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, which may involve those direct occurrences that may satisfy or dissatisfy the customer. In an attempt to appraise student satisfaction with their experiences in higher learning institutions, the student perceptions are searched for on their course of study and other extra curriculum activities that signify “academic life” [6]. The higher education students are exposed to several services in the course of their study in the university and they must interrelate with both physical environment and the service providers within the institution. Furthermore, [4] established that consumers constantly act like investigators as they look for information and form their opinion based on their emotions about the services offered, and these opinions are connected with physical environment (mechanic clues) and the conduct of the service workers (humanic clues). According to [4], the strategies of CEM are categorized into three clues, which are: the functional, mechanic and humanic clues. However, this study concentrated on the influence of humanic and mechanic clues on student loyalty. Mechanic clues include the conducive and cleanliness of the environment in which the service is being offered and the humanic clues are the facial expression, tone of voice and choice of word of the employee of the institutions with the students. According to [11], customer loyalty can be measured in three ways: “Intent to re-purchase; actual re-purchasing behaviour (retention); and customer referrals”, or word of mouth recommendations. When these variables are turned into university services, student loyalty is measured based on the intention to study at an advanced level in the same university, student retention and disposition to endorse the university to family and friends. The Nigerian higher education institution has experienced numerous service failures ranging from poor teaching aids, poor educational infrastructure such as inadequate classrooms and poor physical learning environment and the bad attitude of lecturers towards the student in higher educational institutions. Therefore, higher education institutions in Nigeria require a better reorientation towards actualizing the aims and objectives of HEI which can be accomplished through the adoption and entrenchment of effective customer experience management that will influence student loyalty and eventually enable the institution to have a competitive advantage. It is against this background that this paper examined the roles of customer experience management by concentrating on the mechanic and humanic clues on student loyalty (i.e., student retention and student readiness to endorse the university to others).

#### Objectives of the Study

- I. To find out the effect of mechanic clues on student retention in higher education institution in Nigeria.
- II. To ascertain whether humanic clues influence student willingness to endorse the university to others.

The objectives were hypothesized in null form as:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Mechanic clues do not significant affect student retention in the higher education institution of Nigeria.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Humanic clues do not significant influence student willingness to endorse the university to others.*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *The Concept of Customer Experience Management in HEI*

#### 2.1.1. Customer Experience

Ref. [12] portray positive experiences as those experiences that “a customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time”. Ref. [13] concurred by asserting that “an experience occurs when a customer has any sensation resulting from some level of interaction created by the service provider”. Studies have shown that the formation of an exceptional customer experience appears to be a major dominant objective in business [14,15]. Ref. [16] introduce the notion of total customer experience (TCE) and maintain that it stimulates consumers’ opinions of worth and superior service and in return influences customer loyalty. Ref. [17] asserted that TCE is not just the upgrading of consumer service, but rather a drastic modification in the relationships with consumers via added worth in numerous networks and transactions. Ref. [16] also affirm that this involvement occurs in a multidimensional private, public and learning context, which affects the consumer’s anticipations, view and loyalty. The service industry is undergoing a revolution from the outdated notion of service operation to an experience. Therefore, experiences must “create added value by engaging and connecting with customers in a personal and memorable way” [18]. Henceforth, it could be presumed that the attainment of customer satisfaction is a significant mechanism for higher educational institutions, because of the current stiff competition among universities, higher educational institutions are involved in advertising so as to entice and maintain student’s loyalty. Ref. [19] described customer experience as the consumer’s planned and unplanned experience of the service procedure, the institutions, the amenities and how the consumer interrelates with the employees of the service institution and other consumers. That is, customer experience is among the foremost elements motivating the customer’s process for buying decision. Customer experience is regarded as the complete dealings among clients, companies and other section of a firm that originates a response [20,21].

#### 2.1.2. Customer Experience Management

According to [15], customer experience comprises all “cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer.” Thus far, the majority of customer experience management research worked on the collective facets of market experiences that they estimate most worthwhile of consideration [15,22,23]. Actually, ref. [23] state that both services and verbal components as key customer experience management elements can improve institutions’ social relationships with participating customers. Ref. [24] assert that managing student experience and loyalty is a modern developing notion in the higher education institution atmosphere. They are of the opinion that the management of HEI should entice, serve and preserve students by making sure that the student’s desires, needs and opinion concerning their experiences are pre-determined and carried out effectively. Customer experience management is the managing of the touch points of participating customer interfaces that occur throughout the student lifecycle [25]. Ref. [26] posit that CEM is concerned about those organizations whose main aim is to develop a reasonable experience that will bring about distinct benefits and advantages for the participating customers/consumers. Ref. [15] are of the opinion that the superiority of experience perceived by the customer will serve as one of the utmost significant elements that will influence customer satisfaction. It can be anticipated that the CEM strategies can result in values for most organizations, including higher education institutions. According to [2], Customer Experience Management can be described as the focused efforts built by an institution to advance the worth of the dealings between the client and the institution at different touch-points in such a way that is dependable and operational. By employing the strategies of Customer Experience Management, an institution can attain sustainable competitive advantage, building favourable moments of truth for clients and bringing about improved customer experience, intensify profits, advance customer retention and favourable customer recommendations. According to [27,28], managing customer’s experience in any

institution is the greatest significant component in creating customer loyalty. Ref. [29] asserting that the proficient management of customer experience in any higher education institution ought to bring about an exertion to fascinate and preserve students. Once the new students are registered, the service experiences must be handled such that it will result into memorable experiences, fulfilment and favourable word-of-mouth recommendations. There are three important strategies of customer experience management imbedded in the experience clues; the functional clues, humanic clues and mechanic clues. However, this study is limited to the mechanic and humanic clues.

### 2.1.3. The Mechanic Clues

According to [4], “mechanic clues are especially important for services in which customers experience the facilities for an extended period of time, such as airlines, hotels, universities and hospitals. Mechanic clues are quite salient to value creation in the aforementioned types of services.” Mechanic clues initiate from touchable entities or environments and encompass sounds, smells, sights, tastes and textures. While the functional clues include the trustworthiness of the service offering, the mechanic clues encompass the tangible exterior of the environment of service [4]. Mechanic clues are a solid underpinning of tangible illustrations that support the customer in visualizing the service. Mechanic clues produce initial feelings that instigate the anticipations of the consumer on the type of service delivered by the institute. In higher educational institution, mechanic clues are concerned with conducive service atmosphere of the school, which includes the conducive classroom atmosphere, the cleanliness of the classrooms, comfort rooms, cafeteria and consultation rooms [30]. Mechanic clues also include the proper display of educational signage for instance entrance, exit and location of offices. The design of the building and the spacious arrangement of the different units in the most impressive way [31]. Finally, the easy accessibility of the educational website of the university is regarded as a mechanic clue.

### 2.1.4. The Humanic Clues

Humanic clues are concerned about the behaviours and utterances of the staff of the institution, such as their body language, level of enthusiasm, selection of right words, right expression, suitable dress and neatness. Mechanic and humanic clues are the “how” of the consumer service experience, revealing a lot as regards the way institution is dedicated to understanding and fulfilling their customers’ wants and needs [4]. Humanic clues are concerned about the politeness and the noble human dealings of staff with the university students. This indicates the well-mannered, pleasant, modest, open-minded response of the staff to the student. One investigational study carried out by [32] examined the influence of “respectful employees’ behavior on service encounter satisfaction”. It was discovered that employees’ positive actions improved the client service encounter and gratification. Likewise, Ref. [33] established a ‘personalization’ element that required evidence on the manner an organisation’s employee conduct him/herself generally. This element was discovered to have a strong relationship with satisfaction in healthcare service but with a negative relationship with satisfaction in a car repair service. Also, the ‘personalization’ element was centred on the employee’s behaviour instead of customer’s response.

## 2.2. The Concept of Student Satisfaction and Loyalty

Ref. [34], describe customer satisfaction as “a feeling customers have about the extent to which their experiences with a company have met their needs”. Satisfaction can be described as a customer’s after-purchase assessment of a goods or service [35]. Customer satisfaction has a positive and solid straight influence on customer retention and word-of-mouth recommendations [7,36]. Customer loyalty is seen as a consumer’s intense guarantee to repatronise a specific organization in a reliable way in the future [37]. Also, customer loyalty has a considerable impact on the profit of the organization [38]. Recently, the notion of student satisfaction and loyalty have been the subject of more consideration and have become the most important objectives of every educational institution in developed nations.

Student fulfilment and loyalty are the two foremost values of educational value. Student satisfaction is regarded as “the favourability of a student’s subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education” [39]. It mirrors how well students’ anticipations are satisfied [40]. For instance, student loyalty can be an effective marketing strategy to communicate and endorse the university to family members and friends. Ref. [28] assert that fresh candidates have an idea and an expectation about what they should experience on campus. Therefore, universities must endeavour to know those levels in order to efficiently and effectively manage the experiences of the student, which will result in positive student loyalty.

### 2.3. *Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)*

The experiential learning theory was proposed by [41] who specified that learning encompasses the procedure of knowledge formation via conversion of experience. In a similar vein, ref. [42] indicated that experiential learning theory is dependent on the postulation that learning transpires between people and the environment. ELT considers knowledge as a social adaptation process that employs a complex and all-inclusive view of learning [42]. In this paper, following existing literature, the authors conceptualize the individuals and environment as the “Humanic and Mechanic clues”. Humanic clues are concerned about the behaviours and utterances of the staff of the institution, such as their body language, level of enthusiasm, selection of right words, right expression, suitable dress and neatness while mechanic clues initiate from touchable entities or environments and encompass sounds, smells, sights, tastes and textures. ELT is categorized principally as a constructivist theory since people use cognitive and social properties to turn their experiences into new information [42]. As a result, information is regarded as contextual and shaped as a result of the interface of content and involvement [42]. Since it necessitates the use of multiple learning methods, the revolution of the involvement is central to the learning method. According to [41] the learning phase requires two unified ends which are the processes of capturing and transforming experience. Both phases refer to the different ways used by people to acquire knowledge from the actual world, whether via apprehension or comprehension. Apprehension is attained as a result of the tangibility (mechanic clues) and potentials of an instant experience, whereas comprehension is gotten as a result of the abstract understanding and figurative demonstration of experience (humanic clues). As proposed by [43] the first phase of Kolb’s theory, which is regarded as tangible experience, is accomplished via the use of easy access to the educational website of the university, proper display of educational signage and conducive classroom atmosphere, etc. These will enable the students to be fully immersed in innovative and tangible experiences. In the same vein, the behaviours and utterances of the staff of the institution towards the students, such as their body language, level of enthusiasm, selection of right words and right expression can help in the dynamic conceptualization phase of the knowledge cycle.

### 3. Methodology

The paper investigated the effect of mechanic and humanic clues which are variables of customer experience management on student’s loyalty in higher institution of Nigeria.

**Data Features:** The data for this objective is quantifiable in nature. The quantifiable data comprises of bio-data of the students sampled including their answers on mechanic and humanic clues on student loyalty.

**Data Source:** The data utilized for this study were garnered through designed questionnaire from the students of a private institution in Nigeria. The survey instruments were dispensed to the students instantaneously after their class time of the weekdays. Unplanned or unintended sampling techniques were implemented in apportioning the survey instrument to the student. A total number of 250 copies of the survey instruments were administered to the respondents. However, 215 copies of the survey instruments were

repossessed. The surveyed students of the private institution were required to answer the questions on a 5-point Likert scale, extending from 5 to 1.

**Data Analysis:** The categorical regression analysis, which is regarded as CATREG in SPSS was employed for the study.

**Reliability:** The Cronbach alpha reliability test for the paper was established as 0.864 for the 10 items. This specifies that the study tool utilized for this research is reliable.

**Validity:** The study adopted content validity. The questionnaire was subjected to the review of experts and the researchers were guided by the theory underpinning the study.

#### 4. Results

The standard deviation and the mean for the variables are accessible in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics: Mean and Standard Deviation.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mechanic clues	215	4.12	0.713
Humanic clues	215	3.77	1.104
Student retention	215	4.16	1.120
Student willingness to recommend	215	4.01	0.938

#### *Categorical Regression Results and Discussions of Findings*

Table 2 shows real results of the categorical regression analysis. From the table, it showed the significant influence of students' retention in the university based on the measurements of mechanic clues. The generated  $R^2 = 0.951$  and  $Adj R^2 = 0.948$  means 94.8% of the total variation on student retention in the institution is ascribed to mechanic clues. It is obvious from the outcome that the model has  $F(13.201) = 298.533$  and  $p < 0.000$ . This reveals the cleanliness of the classrooms as a significant predictor that contributed most to explaining the influence of mechanic clues on student retention ( $\beta = 0.353$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). This is followed by the conducive atmosphere of the classroom ( $\beta = 0.310$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), the comfort of the rooms ( $\beta = 0.282$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) and the proper display of educational signage ( $\beta = 0.275$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). This means that the cleanliness of the classrooms in the university makes the highest unique influence on mechanic clues relative to the other variables investigated in this study. Nevertheless, cleanliness of the classrooms, conducive atmosphere of the classroom, comfort of the rooms and proper display of educational signage have a collective significant influence on student retention in the university. This means that mechanic clues contribute significantly to student retention.

Table 3 reveals the products of the categorical regression analysis. It is discovered from the table that there is geometric significant influence on student disposition to endorse the university to others based on the measurements of humanic clues. The generated  $R^2 = 0.968$  and  $Adj R^2 = 0.966$  means 96.6% of the entire variance on student's disposition to endorse the institution to others is ascribed to humanic clues. It is obvious from the outcome that  $F(13.201) = 471.044$  and  $p < 0.000$ . This result reveals that the right choice of words of the staff having the maximum better value of ( $\beta = 0.345$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) contributed most to elucidating the effect of humanic clues on student disposition to endorse the institution to others. This is followed by the friendly behaviour of the staff ( $\beta = 0.341$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), respect and courtesy of the staff ( $\beta = 0.321$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) and the body language of the staff ( $\beta = 0.298$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), respectively. This implies that the right choice of words by the staff of the university makes the maximum unique influence on humanic clues than other variables investigated in this study. Nevertheless, the right choice of words by the staff, the friendly behaviour of the staff, respect and politeness of the staff and the body language of the staff have a collective significant influence on student's disposition to endorse the institution to others. This finding is in harmony with Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1996) [44] who found that the service workers' behaviour affects the opinion of the customer concerning the service.

This means that humanic clues contribute meaningfully to student's disposition to endorse the institution to others.

**Table 2.** Regression effect of mechanic clues on student retention.

	Standardized Coefficients		Df	F	Sig.
	Beta	Bootstrap (1000) Est. of Std. Error			
Comfort of rooms	0.282	0.040	3	50.191	0.000
Conducive classroom atmosphere	0.310	0.031	4	99.686	0.000
Cleanliness of the classrooms	0.353	0.024	3	218.228	0.000
Proper display of educational signages	0.275	0.032	3	75.765	0.000
R <sup>2</sup>	0.951				
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.948				
F	298.533				
Overall Sig.	0.000				

**Table 3.** Regression effect of humanic clues on student willingness to recommend the institution to others.

	Standardized Coefficients		Df	F	Sig.
	Beta	Bootstrap (1000) Est. of Std. Error			
Respect and courtesy of the staff	0.321	0.044	3	52.720	0.000
Right choice of words of the staff	0.345	0.033	3	108.222	0.000
Body language of the staff	0.298	0.038	4	60.706	0.000
Friendly behaviour of the staff	0.341	0.043	3	63.634	0.000
R <sup>2</sup>	0.968				
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.966				
F	471.044				
Overall Sig.	0.000				

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

Customer experience management is a contemporary approach that institutions can use to encourage customer fulfilment and ultimate loyalty. However, there is scarcity of marketing writings, where this germane strategy is related to tertiary institution in Nigeria. The principal intents of this research are to examine the roles of customer experience management focusing on the influence of mechanic and humanic clues on student loyalty. The results of the first hypothesis showed that the cleanliness of the classrooms in the university makes the maximum unique influence on mechanic clues relative to other variables investigated in this study; i.e., the mechanic clues contribute significantly to student retention. Furthermore, it was discovered that the right choice of words by the staff of the university makes the maximum distinctive contribution to elucidating the humanic clues than other variables investigated in this study, which means that humanic clues significantly influence students' disposition to endorse the institution to others. This research has numerous implications for practitioners and academics. Firstly, university management should deliberately focus on mechanic clues by providing conducive environment for the student at all times, most especially the cleanliness of the environment

so as to influence student retention for further studies. Secondly, university management should also consider the needs of the academic staff, empower them and treat them well as this will encourage them to deliver superior value to the student and influence students' disposition to endorse the institution to others. Research has shown that the way staff are handled and empowered is powerfully connected to how eager they will be to deliver better customer worth and engage with creative methods to serving the consumer [44,45]. This implies that student loyalty to the institution can be built where customer experience management strategies are perceived as effective.

## 6. Limitation and Future Research

This study adds to information in this field. However, a lot of boundaries and future studies opportunities need to be mentioned. Firstly, using a single university study has its limitations in generalization. According to the Times Higher Education, the private university used in this study is Nigeria's best university. Secondly, a multi-university study is needed to look at how customer experience management strategies can be luxuriated to increase student loyalty. This type of study would aid in a deeper understanding of the various drivers of customer experience management and student loyalty.

**Author Contributions:** The authors contributed majorly to this paper. T.T.B. conceptualize the paper; O.O.O. did the formal analysis; Methodology was done by D.O.A.; Resources was provided by R.W.; the writing of the original draft was also done by T.T.B. and the review & editing was done by J.I.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The Article Processing Charges (APC) was funded by Covenant University Centre for Research, Innovation and Discovery (CUCRID).

**Acknowledgments:** The authors thank the management of Covenant University for the regular sponsorship of our research papers.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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