



## An exploratory study of the impact of consumerism on behavioural intentions in the tertiary and higher education market in The Gambia

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study sought to investigate the link between consumerism and the behavioural intentions of tertiary and higher education students in The Gambia. Specifically, the study sought to address the following research question: To what extent does consumerism influence the behavioural intentions of tertiary and higher education students in The Gambia?

**Design/Method/Approach:** The research design was underpinned by an intra-paradigm qualitative mixed-methods approach to data collection. This approach supported a preliminary analysis of the contents of 24 carefully selected document sources. Documentary analysis was followed by telephonic and face-to-face in-depth interviews with 59 participants who were recruited from three universities. The study used the flow theory as a supporting framework of analysis.

**Findings:** The findings indicate a pattern of goal-oriented behaviour that is consistent with consumerist intentions. This conclusion is based on evidence showing an increasing demand for value-oriented exchange, particularly in terms of programme quality, graduate employment outcomes, teaching and learning support structures, and overall student engagement strategies at universities.

**Theoretical Implications:** The study bridges the existing knowledge gap on the validity of the notion of consumerism in Gambian universities.

**Practical Implications:** The findings provide a framework for higher education managers to align with the trend of value-oriented behaviour among students in the design and implementation of institutional value propositions.

**Originality/Value:** This study validates the existence of consumerist behaviour in Gambian universities and paves the way for the use of evidence in the design and proposition of value in the tertiary and higher education sector.

**Research Limitations/Future Research:** The transdisciplinary interpretations of consumerism in tertiary and higher education emerged as an area of future research in this study.

**Keywords:** Consumerism, higher education, student consumers, psychogenic needs, consumer behaviour.

## 1. Introduction

Consumerism in tertiary and higher education (THE) is a phenomenon that has its roots in the Eurocentric and Anglo-American tradition of higher education (Gupta, Brooks, & Abrahams, 2023; Paricio, 2017). Although the factors identified as drivers of consumerism in higher education appear to have global dimensions, studies investigating the phenomenon in a purely African context are few or non-existent. Despite evidence of growing interest in the continuing and parallel evolution of students as consumers, research that has investigated these phenomena in a purely African context remains scarce. Consequently, these phenomena have broadly remained controversial. The generation of a consensus on the theoretical validity of students as customers is further problematised by the traditional view of THE as public goods whose primary purpose is to support the intellectual development of students for the good of society (Calma & Dickson-Dean, 2019; Guilbaut, 2018). However, Gupta et al. (2023) argue that consumerism draws its conceptual imperative from the epistemic foundations of neoliberal concepts such as corporatisation, marketisation, and

managerialism in the global higher education sector. This view suggests, albeit implicitly, that the conditions that underpin the emergence of consumerism are global in context. One of such conditions is the trend of liberalisation of the higher education sector in most countries around the globe (Tomlinson, 2018).

Paricion (2017) reports that the deregulation of higher education by many governments instigated the emergence of a consumerist ethos that is relative to the value students attach to their educational experience and the value they expect to receive as returns on their educational investment. Gupta et al. (2023) elucidate that students' expectations of returns on their educational investments manifest in the form of expectations for economic dividends, social prestige, and the view of universities as social brands which should create enduring relationships with their customers or clients in a competitive market. This view builds on the works of Mateus & Acosta (2022), who argue that the customer-centric view of higher education carries reputational implications for tertiary and higher education institutions (THEIs). Hence, this paper views institutional reputation as a group of attributes and characteristics which influence stakeholder impressions and instigate the legitimisation of an institution's image and identity. Based on this, this author argues that the emergent value-consciousness of students designates institutional reputation as a consumerist factor through which students can measure their returns on educational investment (ROEI). Thus, the consumerist phenomenon positions THEIs as service providers in a competitive market (Voss, Gruber, & Szmigin, 2007; Vargo, Wieland & O'Brien, 2023).

Scholars such as Bouaddi & Khaldi (2023) and Bleize & Antheunis (2024) argue that the targeted stimulation of prospective students' recognition of their educational needs triggers a chain of successive behaviours that are motivated by expectations of psychological and emotional benefits rather than physiological ones (Spronken-Smith, 2013). Against the backdrop of the fact that the first university in The Gambia was established only two and half decades ago, this study is conceptualised to generate a preliminary understanding of consumerist behavioural patterns in Gambian universities. Thus, the study has been scoped to bridge existing gaps in our understanding of a potential relationship between consumerist ethos as espoused in Mateus & Acosta (2022) and Gupta et al. (2023) and stakeholders' adoption of the value-based approach to their engagement and interaction with THEIs.

## 2. Review of related literature

### Cross-disciplinary Perspectives and Knowledge Gaps on Consumerism in Tertiary and Higher Education

Despite evidence of growing scholarly interest in consumerism in THE, studies that have made a direct conceptual link between consumerism and the notion of students as consumers are few. However, Harrison & Rister (2015) contribute to the debate on the impact of consumerism on the THE sector by identifying the evolution of student consumers as a direct consequence of consumerism. While their arguments are not underpinned by any theoretical framing of consumerism, these authors elucidate that consumerism in THE is akin to corporatisation. They argue that trends such as government funding fatigue in higher education and the introduction of neo-liberalist theory have led to the adoption of consumerism and the consumer model in THE. Tight (2013) supports this view by arguing that consumerism in THE is evident through student attitudes, behaviours and expectations. These authors, whose research is rooted in the education discipline, maintain that consumerism and the application of the consumer model to education contradict the purpose of education and consequently impose negative consequences on educational outcomes (Tight 2013; Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017). In buttressing the view on the negative impact of consumerism on student performance, Raharjo, Warmana, Yunnarfisah & Firdaus (2022), Morris (2022), and Labaree (2011) argue that the application of the consumer model to THE positions THEIs as corporations. According to these authors, this approach takes the focus away from enacting quality teaching and learning environments that promote intellectual rigour and enlightenment. Instead, the focus shifts to preparing and delivering an educational sales pitch to vulnerable student customers and consumers. Drawing on this view, Raharjo et al. (2022) argue that the introduction of the consumer model of HE obscures the responsibility and involvement required for effective learning. These authors argue that consumerism embodies the mercantile business model, where THEIs act as merchants, aiming to persuade consumers to appreciate their products and services. Implicitly, this argument purports to validate the views expressed in the earlier work of Davis (2011), who argues that the consumer model of THE puts pressure on faculty members to keep learning encounters comfortably less challenging. These anti-consumerist views emanate mainly from the education discipline and contradict the assumptions of the flow theory, which is widely applied to the design and delivery of the traditional model of teaching and learning in THE (dos Santos, Bittencourt, Dermeval, Isotani, Marques, & Silveira, 2018).

The flow theory prescribes that the achievement of an autotelic learning experience must be predicated on the construction of environmental conditions, which generate flow through the arousal of learners and their measured stimulation and regulation.

The insight emerging from this review suggests that the conception of consumerism and the application of the consumer model to THE are fundamentally influenced by discipline-based misconceptions of enterprise and consumption, as well as anecdotal evidence of the negative impact of consumerism on learner agency and engagement (Stoten, 2021). This conclusion draws on Harrison & Risler's (2015) characterisation of consumers as a 'vulnerable group' and THEIs as

corporations and suppliers, who become ‘manipulative’ and drudgerous in their enactment of the consumerist model of learner engagement. These claims highlight the extent to which epistemic gaps exist between the education disciplines on the one hand, and the marketing and consumer psychology disciplines on the other. This situation increases the complexities involved in the effort to reach a trans-disciplinary consensus on the meaning of consumerism and the notion of students as consumers.

### **Consumerism in Tertiary and Higher Education: Behavioural Patterns and Contradictions on Impact**

While linking the emergence of consumerism in THE to what is described as academic capitalism, Harrison and Rister (2015) contradict themselves and acknowledge that consumerism promotes a student-centred approach to higher education programming. Arguably, this acknowledgement provides the context for a transdisciplinary examination of the impact of consumerism in THE. Grounded in the marketing management discipline, this article views consumerism as a motivational symmetry through which students become value conscious while codifying their agency and value exchange parameters with THEIs (Tomlinson, 2018). While this conceptualisation maintains an epistemological link with neoliberal conceptions of THE, it, however, deviates from viewing consumerism as a phenomenon that denotes a relentless consumption culture.

Thus, this article attempts to draw a parallel between the highlighted limitations of consumerism in THE and the consensus (Machost & Stains, 2023; Baslam, Brooks, & Reuters, 2018) on the view that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century THE models seek to transform students from being novice students to becoming active and competent practitioners. Baslam et al. (2018) argue that this transformation is fundamental to students’ personal growth and the evolution of their professional identity. These authors argue that the transition from being students to becoming competent practitioners can be guided by THEIs, using Donald A. Schon’s prescriptions as a framework. Implicitly, the recommendation for guided evolution of students into competent practitioners highlights the consensus on the need to make pedagogical and programming adaptations which include supporting students to develop reflective skills and competences, including a deliberate;

- Observation of one’s actions in context,
- Analysis of those observations, often with feedback from others,
- Identification of learning progress as the basis for new knowledge, and
- Usage of new knowledge to inform future actions and objectives.

A further implication of this is that contemporary models of THE seek to produce students who are anticipatory, contemporaneous, retrospective, deliberative, critical, and personalistic (Hattersley & Nicholson, 2024). These attributes have been identified in the literature (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017; Harrison & Rister, 2018) as some of the consumerist attributes that students exhibit. Others include increased demand for university support services, a more career-focused curriculum, demand for pedagogical innovation, better accommodation, better recreational facilities, and an overall pattern of deliberate expectation of value-added engagement.

The insight emerging from this analysis indicates that the consensus for producing reflective and competent practitioners is akin to conceptual support for students’ development of consumerist behaviour. It re-orientates THEIs to become student-centred while attempting to alter the traditional power balance between students and THEIs.

### **Psychogenic Needs and Consumerism in Tertiary and Higher Education**

The value chain of THEIs conceptually formats a system of value exchange that is designed to facilitate the fulfilment of an individual’s hierarchy of needs. These needs include the need for knowledge, the need for specialised competencies, the need for socio-economic improvement and the need to construct social and professional identity. These needs aggregate into the psychogenic needs that are espoused in Murray’s theory of needs (Zadira & Rudianto, 2022; Xu, Mellor, & Read, 2017; Fallatah & Syed, 2018; Omodan, 2022). Thus, a need is conceptualised as any imbalance between an individual’s desired and actual state. Drawing on this understanding, Murray’s theory of needs proposes the band of non-biogenic needs that are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Psychogenic Needs as value drivers in THE**

Psychogenic need band	Descriptions in context	Application to the tertiary & higher education context
Ambition needs	The need for achievement, the need to overcome obstacles, and the need for recognition depict the social recognition that professional identity and skills-based economic empowerment foster.	Speciality knowledge, improve economic status, problem solving, finding adequate work, enhanced competence from training, graduates' personal development, professional identity, situational coping
Materialistic need	The need to acquire material possessions through creativity, order and retention of the cognitive and social competences that result from THE	Returns on Education (ROE), social and economic gains from education, the ability to develop new ideas and entrepreneurship skills
The need for power	The power or empowerment that results from education and training. The benefits of increased levels of awareness and capacity to freely identify and explore political and economic opportunities without fear of intimidation or subjugation. Fulfilling these needs puts the individual in a position of influence, enabling them to generate cooperation and compliance on various issues of interest easily.	Ability to develop new ideas, adaptability, use of technology, analytical thinking, problem solving, team skills, entrepreneurship skills
The need for affection	There is a need for professional identity and affiliation with professional associations that promote the professional recognition of experts in their respective fields of expertise a professional association for teachers, engineers, or business professionals.	Professional identity, social recognition, improved economic status, and Returns on Education (ROE)
The need for information	The need for knowledge and exposition	

**Source:** (Zadira & Rudianto, 2022; Xu, Mellor, & Read, 2017; Fallatah & Syed, 2018; Omodan, 2022)

Scholars argue that these needs provide THE prospects with the drive to search for alternatives prior to the enrolment decisions and choices. Thus, this goal-oriented behaviour provides conceptual support to the evolution of consumerism and the notion of students as consumers in THE (Tomlinson, 2015). The implication of the relationship between the goal-directed behaviour of students and their evolution as consumers draws its theoretical legitimacy from the evidence that suggests that students' satisfaction is a function of the perceived quality of student learning experience (SLE).

Thus, Kahu & Picton (2022) argue that SLE is a multidimensional construct, which involves multiple and ongoing transitions which students undergo throughout their time in a THE programme. Hence, this article views SLE as the cumulative exposures which students undergo from their iterative interactions with academic staff, learning materials, and the wider institutional environment. Thus, the transition of learners from students to consumers, and the inception of consumerist behaviour among students draws its validity from the value perceptions and the regimented demands that students have of available learning support strategies; students' perception of institutional and disciplinary reputations, and teaching and practices within their institutions (Neves & Hewitt, 2020; Thomas, 2012).

The attainment of these goals, therefore, requires THEIs to draw on evidence of students' motivation to create arousal structures and systems which include promotion of professional and social recognition benefits, power benefits, materialistic benefits, as well as improvements in the cognitive structures that are inherent in the recognition and affirmation benefits of THE.

### **Theoretical Framework: The flow theory**

Drawing on insight from the evidence of consumerist behaviour in THE (Tomlinson, 2017; 2018), and the evolution of students as reflective practitioners, Kiymalioglu (2022) and Paricio (2017) argue that higher education managers need to develop strategies which aim at increasing the interest and loyalty of student consumers towards academic and extracurricular offers. These authors argue that such a strategy should aim at making the SLE unique and enjoyable, arguing that the more concentration and delight the consumers (students) feel during this experience, the more "flow"

they will feel and the urge for a repeat experience. Harmon-Jones & Mills (2019) posit that such experience will significantly reduce dissonance while increasing the loyalty intentions of students.

Drawing on this evidence and the objectives of this study, the flow theory was used as the framework for analysis in this article. The flow theory was first proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) in his book “Beyond Boredom and Anxiety” (Abuhamdeh, 2020; Palomäki, Tammi, Lehtonen, Seittenranta, Laakasuo, Abuhamdeh, Otto Lappi, & Cowley, 2021). According to these authors, Csikszentmihalyi described the notion of an individual's flow state as the optimal experience that results from the intrinsic motivation for work, sports, or artistic performance. Dos-Santos, Bittencourt, Dermeval, Isotani, Macqices, & Silverial (2018) maintain that the flow state results from such intrinsic motivators as the need for autonomy, the need for achievement, relatedness, the need for competence, and alignment of work with an individual's values.

Kiyimalioğlu (2022) and Lovoie, Main, and Stuart-Edwards (2021) support this view. The authors postulate that the flow state is a psychological state that is motivated by a triggered interaction of an individual's psychogenic needs at the agency interface. In his initial proposal, Csikszentmihalyi identified arousal, control, anxiety, relaxation, worry, boredom, and apathy as emotional states that are related to flow. These emotions are compatible with the emotions that the pedagogical and student engagement doctrines of THEIs tend to evoke and displace at the teaching and learning interface. This position is buttressed by Nerren & Vierra (2020) in their analyses of the arousal theory. These authors argue that effective learning takes place under the best conditions for stimulation and regulation. This assertion means that the right amount of stimuli is needed to create flow conditions. A further implication of this is that arousal or stimuli which generate the flow conditions as espoused in Csikszentmihalyi (1975), when applied in a teaching and learning context, can increase learning and enhance student performance. This insight provides further justification for the use of flow theory as a theoretical framework in this study. The flow prerequisites highlighted in Table 2 provide a framework for analysing the value consciousness of students and conjecturing the evolution of consumerist behaviour in THE.

**Table 2: Scholarly perspectives on the Flow Theory**

Csikszentmihalyi (1975,1990)	Hoffman & Navak (1996)	Salanova, Rodriguez-Sanchez, Schanfeld, & Cifre 2014)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clear goals</li> <li>2. Immediate feedback</li> <li>3. Match between personal skills and task challenges</li> <li>4. Merger of action and awareness</li> <li>5. Concentration on task</li> <li>6. A sense of control</li> <li>7. Loss of self-consciousness</li> <li>8. Sense of time-chase</li> <li>9. Expectation of autotelic experience</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Enjoyment</li> <li>2. Tele-presence</li> <li>3. Focused attention</li> <li>4. Engagement</li> <li>5. Time-distortion</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Absorption</li> <li>2. Enjoyment</li> <li>3. Intrinsic interest</li> </ol>

**Source:** (Dos-Santos et al.2018; Kiyimalioğlu, 2022)

Thus, the minimum requirement for attaining autotelic experience to meet learners' expectations in teaching and learning must be constructed to ensure that learning encounters consistently provide a balance between the level of built-in challenges in tasks and the ability required by students to complete them. This view makes an implicit assumption that the THEI generates prior understanding of the cognitive profiles of students. Admiraal, Huizenga, Akkerman, and Dam (2011) argue that consistently higher levels of difficulty on tasks relative to the cognitive capacity of the students will generate anxiety, while the flip side of this will generate boredom.

The insight emerging from this review provides epistemological support and, consequently, the theoretical foundation for applying flow theory as the article's analytical framework. The relationship between students and THEIs replicates an agency arrangement that is value-oriented and governed by a set of binding responsibilities. What increases the complexity of this relationship is that THEIs are normatively constructed with sub-features and interdependent units, which indicate disciplinary breadth and reputation, institutional pedagogical identity, institutional learning environments, and a repertoire of student engagement strategies. These sub-features manifest as sub-identities, which contribute to an institution's stimulus values spectrum (Triventi, 2013). Traditionally, THEIs deploy such values in their effort to generate differentiation for their value offers and reputational outcomes that include understanding student consumers' gestalt cycle of needs at the expense of other competing institutions (Rusidian, Sugiat & Tojiri, 2024). These features instruct the institutional behavioural identity elements, which underpin the value nodes on which the consumerist nuances of students can be anchored.

The prerequisites for attaining the flow state, as outlined in Table 2, provide a framework for analysing how students' psychogenic needs intersect with their expectations of THEIs, based on the latter's construction of their teaching and



learning environment. The indicated elements also support the analysis of how an institution's pedagogical doctrines, industry partnerships, and other student engagement practices combine to generate a prism of autotelic higher education experience. The insight emerging from this analysis is that the expectation and achievement of an optimal higher education experience, as reported in Tomilson (2017), emerges as the primary driver of consumerist behaviour among students. Hence, the aspiration for THE is predicated on expectations for the flow state at every point throughout a student's enrolment period.

This conclusion is supported by extant literature in higher education marketing. GTTI (2018) and Pinar *et al.* 2014 identify the required institutional environment and teaching and learning processes which facilitate students' attainment of autotelic experience. These authors argue that the construction of such experience can be based on parameters which enhance students' perception of the usefulness of their courses, perception of institutional pedagogical practices, and perception of the institutional learning environment. These parameters are further described in Table 3.

**Table 3: Sources of Autotelic Experience in THEIs**

Teaching and learning environment/study conditions	Pedagogical practices/objectives	Perceived usefulness of studies
Quality of classroom learning; Recreational Facilities; Quality of learning materials; Faculty-student contact; Perceived quality of teachers; Availability and quality of educational technology; Availability and quality of industry exposure; Quality of physical environment	Relevance of practice-based teaching; Practical experience of staff; Theory/Speciality knowledge; Ability to develop new ideas; Adaptability/Situational coping competence; Analytical Thinking; Problem Solving; People/Team skills; Entrepreneurial skills	Finding adequate work, relevant to the present job; Usefulness to personal development; Relevance of what was Learned

**Sources:** (GTTI 2018; Kıymalıoğlu, 2022)

The themes and descriptions that are indicated in Table 3 provide a summary of the primary sources of autotelic experience as espoused in Kıymalıoğlu (2022) and GTTI (2018). Implicitly, the indicated factors constitute the consumerist ethos and the value exchange benchmarks of contemporary THE students and prospects.

### Conceptual Framework

There is consensus in the literature on emerging changes in the conception and programming of THE around the globe (Cross, 2018; Kruss et al., 2015). This consensus implies that THEIs need to be prepared to track and respond to changing motivational patterns of students as well as emerging needs of industry and society. Over the past five decades, these trends, including the changing expectations of students, have emerged to challenge the adaptive capacities of THEIs, especially those in SSA (Ikonne, 2024). In recognition of this emerging trend, OECD (2019) argues that the consistency of new trends in students' expectations has instigated changes in the programming of THE while triggering the evolution of students from being mere learners to becoming reflective practitioners. Implicitly, this view provides a conceptual validation for the emergence of consumerism in THE. Against this background, this article conceptualises consumerism as a motivational symmetry through which students become value conscious while codifying their agency and value exchange parameters with THEIs. Thus, it has become essential for THEIs to routinely seek evidence of underlying motives and students' requirements for post-secondary education. This evidence-based approach would generate actionable data for the design of value-based educational programmes and conscious engagement of THE prospects. Thus, this approach highlights the need for a routinised reflection on the extent to which institutional response meets students' prior enrolment value exchange expectations of learning. This scenario further depicts a behavioural pattern that is implicit in consumerist intensity through which students evaluate institutional readiness and pedigree in meeting their prior enrollment requirements (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022). The focus of such readiness will include the invocation of flow and optimal experience by THEIs, using specific criteria.

### 3. Research Question and Research Objectives

To explore the central constructs in this study, the following broad research question was proposed: To what extent does consumerism influence behavioural intentions in the tertiary and higher education market in The Gambia? To develop a holistic understanding of the consumerist phenomenon in tertiary and higher education, the following research objectives were pursued:

**ROB1:** To evaluate the impact of consumerism on the behaviour of tertiary and higher education students.

**ROB2:** To examine the relationship between psychogenic needs and consumerist behaviour in the tertiary and higher education market.

**ROB3:** To examine the pattern of consumerist behaviour in tertiary and higher education.

#### 4. Research Philosophy, Design and Approach

This study sought to answer the research question by adopting interpretivism as the research philosophy. The choice of interpretivism in this study supports the socially constructed nature of consumerism and its under-researched evolutionary pattern in THEIs in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The evidence that the research problem has been investigated in-depth to inform hypotheses and related positivist deductions provided further justification for the adoption of interpretivism and the inductive approach to data collection in this study.

#### Target population, sampling technique and sample size

Document analysis and in-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection methods. As stipulated in O'Reilly, Kiyimba and Drewett (2020), this approach is underpinned by the intra-paradigm, qualitative mixed method of data collection. Document analysis and in-depth interviews were implemented in sequence, starting with the selection and analysis of the 24 sources that are shown in Table 3. These sources were selected based on the core inclusion criteria of authenticity and credibility (Marriame & Tisdell, 2018; Morgan, 2022). In this effort, the researcher sought evidence of the impact of consumerism on the behaviour of students as consumers as well as evidence on the pattern of consumerist behaviour among students in tertiary and higher education in The Gambia. As the design of this study did not permit a predetermination of the number of sources to be analysed, this researcher ended the search with the 24<sup>th</sup> source when evidence of data saturation on the objectives of the study emerged.

For in-depth interviews, 59 participants who were selected from three universities volunteered to take part in the study. An overview of the sampling techniques and sample size is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Overview of the Sample**

Participant categories	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Total
Year 1 undergraduate students	03	08	04	15
Year 2 undergraduate students	05	03	02	10
Year 3 undergraduate students	05	03	05	13
Year 4 undergraduate students	04	05	01	10
Students who have completed undergraduate studies	05	04	02	11
Total	22	23	14	59

The universities from which participants were selected exhibit significant variations in their status (public or private), their academic specialisations, and the sizes of their student populations. This approach, which is implicit in the maximum variation sampling (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024), facilitated insight into the participants' shared and distinct patterns of tertiary and higher education motivations, and their corresponding evolution of consumerist identity. Using this approach, this researcher recruited 59 volunteers to participate in this study. Ikonne (2024) and Zhang, Wang, Millar, Li, and Yang (2017) are sources that demonstrate the efficacy of the maximum variation approach, especially in research designs that use small to medium sample sizes.

#### Data collection methods and procedure

The intra-paradigm, qualitative mixed method, as stipulated in O'Reilly, Kiyimba and Drewett (2020), guided the data collection procedure in this study. This approach, grounded in the interpretivist research philosophy, provided the design rationale for the sequential use of document analysis and face-to-face and telephonic interviews as data collection methods in this study. Adopting the intra-paradigm mixed method within an interpretivist philosophy ensured that two different data collection methods were used, not just to enhance the credibility of findings but also to unify the epistemological foundations of document analysis and in-depth interviews in a social research context.

#### Document selection criteria

Drawing on the work of Morgan (2022), the selection of the sources that were analysed in this study was guided by the following criteria: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. The authenticity criterion enabled this researcher to select sources that are original in their authorship and database sources. Thus, the researcher ensured that all selected sources came from authentic sources, which include Open Research Library, Cambridge Open Access, Google Scholar, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Science-Direct, and Social Science Research Network (SSRN). The credibility criterion, on its part, refers to the extent to which a source is error and distortion-free (Morgan, 2022). Using this criterion, this researcher ensured that all selected sources were peer-reviewed and published by credible institutions. The representativeness criterion, on the other hand, enabled this researcher to ensure that the contents of the selected documents are not steeped in idiosyncratic views or bias. Instead, such sources were verified to carry evidence of a broad and diverse array of scholarly views on consumerism in THE. The last criterion, which is meaning, supported the researcher's assessment of the extent to which the consumerist phenomenon in THE is elucidated in the selected sources. Meaning, as a criterion, enabled the researcher to check the extent to which the contents of the selected sources reflect the depth of insight, which the research question seeks to facilitate.

**Table 5: Sources of document analysis data**

S/n	Data Source	Theme	Document type /Types of data
1	Bowers, Stover, Strachan, Hughes, Edwards, Diepenbrock, & Oliviera (2024)	The Role of Consumerism in Pharmacy Education	Peer-reviewed article /textual data
2	Raharjo, Warmana, Yunnafisah, & Firdaus (2022)	Student Consumerism Attitudes towards Higher Education	Peer-reviewed article /textual data
3	Raharjo, Warmana, & Kristianto, (2022).	Brand personality and student consumerism towards higher education in Indonesia.	Peer-reviewed article /textual data
4	Ashwin, Paul, Benjamin, Schneider, Agrawal, & Smith (2023)	Beyond the Dichotomy of Students-as-Consumers and Personal Transformation: What Students Want from Their Degrees and Their Engagement with Knowledge	Peer-reviewed article /textual data
5	Harrison & Risler (2015)	The Role Consumerism Plays in Student Learning	Peer-reviewed article /textual data
6	Morris (2022)	Consumerist views of higher education and links to student wellbeing and achievement: an analysis based on the concept of autonomy as depicted in self-determination theory	Peer-reviewed article/textual & numerical data
7	Bunce, Baird, & Jones (2017)	The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance	Peer-reviewed article/textual & numerical data
8	Gupta, Brooks & Abrahams (2025)	Higher education students as consumers: a cross-country Comparative analysis of students' views	Peer-reviewed article/textual
9	Govender, Soni & David (2022)	Students as customers of higher education: Perceptions of South African students	Peer-reviewed article/textual & numerical data
10	Brooks (2022)	Students as consumers? The perspectives of students' union leaders across Europe	Peer-reviewed article/textual
12	Brooks & Abrahams (2020).	Higher education students as consumers?: Evidence from England. In 13Educational choices, transitions and aspirations in Europe.	Peer-reviewed article/textual
13	Sanchez-Campos, Nixon, Winklhofer & Nemkova (2024)	More than just consumers? Alternative representations of students when higher education becomes 'free'	Peer-reviewed article/textual
14	Naidoo, Shankar & Veer (2011)	The Consumerist Turn in Higher Education: Policy Aspirations and Outcomes	Peer-reviewed article/textual
15	Paricio (2017)	Students as Customers: A Paradigm Shift in Higher Education	Peer-reviewed article/textual
16	Woodson (2013)	The Effects of Consumerism on Access to Higher Education	Peer-reviewed article/textual
17	Jabbar, Analoui, Kong & Mirza (2017)	Consumerisation in UK higher education business schools: Higher fees, greater stress and debatable outcomes	Peer-reviewed article/textual
18	Sheng (2023)	Students as Consumers? Chinese International Students' Perspectives and Experiences in UK Universities	Peer-reviewed article/textual & numerical data
19	Silverio, Wilkinson, & Wilkinson	The Powerful Student Consumer and the Commodified Academic: A	Peer-reviewed article/textual



	(2021).	Depiction of the Marketised UK Higher Education System through a Textual Analysis of the ITV Drama Cheat	
20	Mbokane & Modley (2024)	Green Consumerism in Young Adults: Attitudes and Awareness in University Students in Johannesburg, South Africa.	Peer-reviewed article/textual
21	Palfreyman (2013).	Quality & consumerism in higher education. Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education	Peer-reviewed article/textual
22	Woodall, Tony & Hiller, Alex & Resnick, Sheilagh (2012)	Making Sense of Higher Education: Students as Consumers and the Value of the University Experience. Studies in Higher Education	Peer-reviewed article/textual
23	Naidoo & Whitty (2014).	Students as Consumers: Commodifying or Democratising Learning?	Peer-reviewed article/textual
24	Hall (2013)	Consumerism and consumer complexity: Implications for university teaching and teaching evaluation	Peer-reviewed article/textual

The in-depth interview phase followed the conclusion of the documentary analysis phase. The research question and research objectives were explored using semi-structured questions. The interviews were conducted via a combination of face-to-face and telephone discussions on the main themes of the study. The profiles and categories of participants are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: In-depth Interview participants categories**

Participant category	Number of participants	Academic discipline of participants
<b>Year 1 undergraduate students</b>	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engineering</li> <li>• Management &amp; Business Administration</li> <li>• Development Studies</li> <li>• Economics</li> <li>• Educational Studies</li> </ul>
<b>Year 2 undergraduate students</b>	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engineering</li> <li>• Management &amp; Business Administration</li> <li>• Development Studies</li> <li>• Economics</li> <li>• Educational Studies</li> </ul>
<b>Year 3 undergraduate students</b>	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engineering</li> <li>• Management &amp; Business Administration</li> <li>• Development Studies</li> <li>• Economics</li> <li>• Educational Studies</li> </ul>
<b>Year 4 undergraduate students</b>	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engineering</li> <li>• Management &amp; Business Administration</li> <li>• Development Studies</li> <li>• Economics</li> <li>• Educational Studies</li> </ul>
<b>Graduates</b>	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engineering</li> <li>• Management &amp; Business Administration</li> <li>• Development Studies</li> <li>• Economics</li> <li>• Educational Studies</li> </ul>

## Data Analysis

The document analysis method was used to analyse the data derived from examining the sources shown in Table 5. A context-based analysis framework guided this process. Thus, the research question guided the search for cues and evidence of the impact and pattern of consumerism on the behaviour of participants as consumers of THE services. The intensive reading strategy was employed to analyse the selected documents for consistency in views on the impact of consumerism on behavioural intentions in THE. Then, data codes and categories were generated based on the primary constructs of the study (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017).

Thematic analysis, as recommended by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), was used to analyse interview data. Thus, the analysis process began with transcription of recorded data. While the transcription phase facilitated the researcher's immersion into the data, it preceded the generation of codes and themes around the impact and pattern of consumerism on the behavioural tendencies of students as consumers (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Kiger & Virpio, 2020). This approach enabled the researcher to optimally interrogate the meanings and recollections of the participants on their repeated exposures and dispositions to the primary constructs in this study.

## 5. Findings

**Table 7: Summary of findings**

Research objectives	Findings
The impact of consumerism on behavioural intentions in the tertiary and higher education market	The findings indicate that Gambian students exhibit goal-oriented behaviour that is consistent with consumerist intentions. This conclusion draws on evidence that shows an increasing demand pattern for value-oriented exchange, especially in the configuration of programme quality, graduate employment outcomes, teaching and learning support structures and the overall SLE strategies of THEIs.
The relationship between psychogenic needs and consumerist behaviour in the tertiary and higher education market	The findings indicate that the motivation for tertiary and higher education subscriptions is driven by multiple factors, which intervene in shaping the impressions, behaviour and expectations of students. The evidence suggests that the decision to enrol in THE is motivated by the sum of attitudes, feelings, and associations which students hold of their disciplines and THEIs. Therefore, the behavioural intentions exhibited by students are influenced by the interactions between the perceived attractiveness and market value of discipline-related professions, projections of post-graduation social and economic gains, and the cultural associations a given society holds for professions associated with students' academic disciplines. The findings indicate that these variables influence students' expectations, and thus constitute their consumerist ethos and expectations of value from THEIs.
The pattern of consumerist behaviour in tertiary and higher education	The evidence suggests that students, in their assumption of the consumerist identity, become influenced by the motivated expectations, collective attitudes, feelings, and individual reflections in their desire for self-actualisation, and post-training benefits and opportunities. Thus, the expectations for defined benefits and values manifest in a motivational symmetry through which students become value conscious and codify their agency terms and value exchange frameworks with THEIs.

## 6. Discussion of key Findings

This study sought to explore the impact of consumerism on behavioural intentions in the THE market. Against this background, one of the main contributions of this study emerged in the evidence which suggests that the expectations of students in the selected THEIs mirror consumerist intentions. The evidence indicates that consumerist behaviour of students includes a pattern of value-based expectations in the areas of study conditions (GTT, 2018), pedagogical practices (Ikonne, 2024), post-graduation social and economic recognition, and learner agency. The behavioural pattern that is so exhibited typifies the consumer orientation that is indicative of a service-dominant logic where consumers are engaged as active participants in the value co-creation process (Vargo, et al. 2023; Voss et al. 2007).

Another contribution of this study is the evidence which suggests that motivation for THE is driven by the sum of attitudes, feelings, and associations which students hold of their study programmes (Brooks, 2022). These factors serve as intrinsic motivators, which influence students' expectations in the same way that externally communicated brand promises shape consumer expectations and behaviour (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021). The expectations of post-graduation social and economic gains emerge as psychogenic and esteem needs which influence the behavioural intentions of students (Morris, 2022). These needs are underpinned by the desire for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as

educational outcomes, which influence students' post-graduation socio-economic profiles and a self-determination for future career choices and accomplishments (Dos-Santos, 2018). Thus, these factors coalesce to form the benchmarks for students' evaluation of value offers from THEIs (Palfreyman, 2013).

The pattern of consumerist behaviour which students exhibit thus manifests in the consistency of expectations, their collective attitudes and desires for post-graduation social and economic improvements (Brooks & Abraham, 2020). Therefore, the motivational symmetry, which results from these expectations of value-oriented teaching and learning support, configurations of programme quality criteria, and good SLEs, form the thresholds of consumerist demands by students (Govender et al. 2022).

The managerial implications of these findings manifest in the understanding that the programming and delivery of the programmes need to be evidence-based. Such managerial functions need to draw on the evidence, which suggests that students have evolved from being passive recipients of knowledge to becoming value-conscious and outcome-oriented co-creators of THE value (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017).

Thus, consumerism influences behavioural intentions in THE to the extent that students' expectations of educational outcomes coalesce to form a symmetry for codes of engagement with THEIs (Ashwin et al. 2023; Bower et al. 2024). This assertion implies that the consumerist needs and expectations of students emerge as ethos and standards for their evaluation of returns on their educational investments.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings in this study indicate that the notion of consumerism in THE and the view of students as consumers is emerging from a cross-disciplinary debate that centres on understanding its epistemological foundation and validity. The debate is emerging from two schools that are diametrically opposed. On one side is the traditionalists' view, which suggests that consumerism connotes the commodification of education and knowledge and the imposition of mercantile values on the programming of THE. The non-traditionalist scholars who reside primarily in the management discipline, on their part, view consumerism as a concept that highlights the necessity for THEIs to deliver value for money in recognition of students' rights and expectations. This situation is indicative of a gap in the interdisciplinary conceptions of the notions of enterprise and consumption, and anecdotal evidence of the negative impact of consumerism on learner agency and engagement. The evidence of goal-oriented behaviour of students from the selected institutions is indicative of their evolution from being mere recipients of knowledge to co-creators of value and aspiration for competent practice. This view of consumerism predominantly resides in the management discipline. The contrary view of consumerism in THE resides predominantly in the education discipline. The evidence shows a consistent characterisation of a market-led approach to the management of THE as 'manipulative'. While portraying students as a 'vulnerable group' who cannot withstand the manipulative intentions of THEIs in their proposition of value. This view highlights the pursuit of a cross-disciplinary consensus on the impact of consumerism on the behaviour of THE students, as an area of future research.

## Authors' contribution

**Primary and sole author: Ozioma Ikonne.** As the sole author, I was responsible for the overall production of this work. I was responsible for Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, and Writing the original draft.

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