

**Public Attitudes towards the “Customer” Metaphor in Social Institutions:  
An Exploratory Study in Hong Kong and Singapore**

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**Abstract**

After four decades of intellectual debates on the appropriateness of using the “customer” terminology in social institutions, to date, no empirical research has been conducted to further explore the subject especially from non-Western countries. Thus, nation-wide samples were drawn from two Asian tigers, Hong Kong and Singapore, to examine the fundamental question, “Should we treat students, patients, church followers, political constituencies, news readers, and others alike as ‘customers’?” This study evaluated the public attitudes through online surveys and focus groups. Results showed that respondents held diverse views and the potential role of demographic variables (gender and race) in determining public attitudes produced benchmark data for future research in consumer behaviour and implications on marketing policy.

Keywords: Customer, marketing, social institutions, public attitudes, Hong Kong, Singapore

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### **Introduction**

Traditionally, marketing – as an information subsidy – has been largely confined to the business context, where firms engage in transactions of tangible consumer goods and/or services with their customers (Kotler, 2005). However, of late, trends of social institutions moving towards privatisation have emerged, leading us to the unanimous conclusion that marketing has transcended business boundaries and crept into social institutions (Kotler, 2005).

In the academic realm, the debate was first purported in the late 1960s when Kotler and Levy (1969) introduced the idea of broadening marketing and the customer metaphor. This school of thought was met with opposition when Laczniak and Michie (1979) contended that a disruption to social order would arise. Luck (1969) contributed to the opposition stand and argued that “if marketing is so many things, then it is nothing.” The discussion carried on through the millennium when Hutton (2001, 2005) put forth the view that marketing in social institutions would distort the purposes and roles that they have in the society. Kotler (2005) defended the broadening position by contending that such a movement would “free the marketing paradigm from the narrow confines of commercial marketing” and apply to many other contexts “in which exchange and relationship activities take place” (p. 114-116).

Is marketing then acceptable in these social institutions, where their goods are sometimes bounded by moral responsibilities and obligations? Would marketing inadvertently bring along with it the customer metaphor into such institutions and render their audience as “consumers” or “customers”? These questions serve to establish the premises for social institutions in today’s context. In the face of invasive marketing, what are the limits that social institutions should draw? Specifically, coming from the perspectives of the receiving end, are there things that social institutions – as marketers – can or cannot do?

James G. Hutton, in his book *The Feel-Good Society*, investigated the “customer” metaphor and marketing in social institutions, by providing succinct examples within the American context (2005). In addition, there are ongoing discussion between proponents and opponents in marketing in these social institutions namely education (see Albanese, 1999; Ritzer, 1996, 1998; Rotfeld, 2000), government (see Needham, 2003; Scullion, 2008), healthcare (Herzlinger, 2004; Kay, 2007; Porter & Teisberg, 2004), news media (Ettma & Whitney, 1994; Hutton, 2005; McManus, 1994; Yi & Sarvary, 2007), and religion (see Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989; Kenneson, Street & Hauerwas, 1997).

In Asia, the rapid economic and international trade development give rise to marketing across all private, public, and non-profit sectors. For instance, Hong Kong and Singapore, the leading city-states in the region, provide quality social services such as education and healthcare to their citizens. Hong Kong is often cited as the freest market in the world, and a consumer mecca in many respects. While Hong Kong is known for its Laissez-fair market practice, however, its Chinese culture makes it plausible that it would demonstrate more conservative values when it comes to religion, education, and so forth. Singapore, the world’s sixth country in best healthcare

service and regional education hub, has been positioning itself to be the “Asian” version of Switzerland. This multicultural city-state also offers freedom in religious worships such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Muslim. Though Hong Kong and Singapore look alike as a city in foreigners’ eyes, they are indeed quite dissimilar. For example, the social capitalism is very strong in Hong Kong while Singaporeans tend to be muted in bubbles because of the paternalistic government. Thus, it is timely to take a closer look at the extent to which the competitive market environment and consumerism growth contribute to such development.

### Research Questions and Methods

- 1) How acceptable is marketing across the social institutions, namely education, government, healthcare, news media, and religion, among the public between Hong Kong and Singapore?
- 2) What areas do the Hong Kong and Singapore public accept the use of marketing in social institutions? What areas do they not accept the use of marketing in social institutions?
- 3) Are there any differences in the public attitudes with regard to the demographics such as gender and race?

Surveys were conducted via an online site in English. Participants were asked to respond via a five-point Likert scale (1 = “strong agree”; 5 = “strongly disagree”) to the following statements:

1. Hospitals and doctors should treat their patients as customers.
2. Colleges and universities should treat their students as customers.
3. Primary and secondary schools should treat their students as customers.
4. The news media should treat their viewers, readers, and listeners as customers.
5. Religious institutions such as temples, churches, and mosques should treat their members as customers.
6. Elected appointed government officials should treat their constituents as customers.
7. Retail stores should treat their shoppers as customers.

A total of 1,491 completed responses were received (841 from HK; 650 from Singapore). Demographics (gender and race only) are summarized in Table 1. The age group breakdowns of the two samples both represent the general adult population charts. Six focus groups (three in each country) were also conducted to gather insights. A focus group guide was used and participants were first asked to define “customer” followed by sharing their views on each of the five social institutions treating its audience as “customers” and the implications. Each focus group consisted of eight to 12 participants with a mix of background such as gender and race.

**Table 1- Demographic Information**

	Hong Kong (n=841)	Singapore (n=650)
Gender		
Male	44.6%	46.4%
Female	55.4%	53.6%
Race		
Chinese	81%	82%
Non-Chinese	19%	18%

## Results, Analysis and Conclusion

### RQ1

Results showed that people in Hong Kong and Singapore shared very different views on using the “customer” metaphor across all social institutions. Specifically, as a shopping paradise, HK people by default prefer to be treated as “kings” or “queens” in retail service. They also accept to be treated as customers in hospitals, news media, and the government but not so much in education or religious institutions. This could be explained by the differences in health policy. People in HK expect to enjoy the right as a customer whenever there is cost incurred. The same case applies to news media. People expect to be pandered since they pay and consume the services and goods that are advertised. Singapore respondents, however, do not appreciate being treated as customers not only in retail stores, but also in hospitals and religious institutions. However, they are very receptive in the marketing concepts in education and news media. With more than 1,200 private education institutes and the different languages of news publications, Singaporeans do feel more acceptable to be treated as customers in these contexts.

**Table 2 - Customer metaphor across different social institutions**

		Hospital	Colleges & University	Primary & Secondary Schools	News media	Religious institutions	Government	Retail stores
Hong Kong (n=841)								
Mean	2.78	3.30	3.54	2.49	3.63	2.86	1.53	
SD	1.19	1.17	1.16	1.13	1.10	1.25	0.73	
Singapore (n=650)								
Mean	3.24	2.10	2.50	2.89	3.46	2.42	3.60	
SD	1.00	0.84	1.26	1.19	1.12	1.13	1.1	
t-value	7.94	-22.14	-16.49	6.62	-2.94	-7.04	43.25	
Significance	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	

A value of  $p < .05$  is considered significant. 1 = Strongly agree; 5 = Strongly disagree

### RQ2

Hospital. The majority participants held the perspectives that hospitals should not be totally marketed; however, a goodwill-based marketing is acceptable. (HK): “Doctors should not treat patients as customers when making their professional judgment on illnesses. Yet they should treat patients as customers when considering the benefits and the right of the patients, like giving more choices or solutions for them to choose.” (Singapore): “(Hospitals) cannot be commercialised, because (the hospital’s responsibility is to) save life. It’s a noble cause (or responsibility)...a higher calling.”

Education. At the broader scale, respondents in both countries felt that students should not be treated as customers but schools should be run as business. “Customers have the right to reject the offers from sales person, but students cannot. For example, students cannot reject to do their assignment.” “I believe in the whole idea that individual students should be nurtured. You don’t

give them unequal attention. You showed them with all the teaching you can do. Basically that's the part where they are not considered as customers." "The positive would be similar to the hospital one. It can better improve the services – the facilities and that kind of thing – which would benefit the students." Such comments are largely influenced by the Confucius thinking.

Religion. There was a clear consensus among all participants from HK and Singapore that religious institutions should *not* treat their followers as customers. (HK): "I think there is no customer relationship in religion. Belief is all about willingness. There is a cost to run a church or temple and part of the money is from followers. Yet followers contribute at their own will as they believe it. Hence it is not a trade." (Singapore): "It's something scared, so it is a bit weird to put a price to it." There was only one exception – service charge rate and quality of service. "In funeral services, people who give different payments get different treatment in the country."

Government. For those who favour the idea, they usually come from the perspective of money and the tax-paying rationale. (HK) "We are taxpayers. The officers should utilise the money we paid wisely and do something that we want to get." For those who do not favor the idea, they believe the possible implications that "richer and able to pay citizens will stand to gain as compared to the poorer ones (Singapore)." Some respondents expected the government to provide the same degree of service as any business would for their customers. "I think they are trying to treat the public as customers. In the community, the administration leaders would meet local citizens each week to listen to their concerns, complaints and suggestion, and try to help them to figure out their problems." "In other countries if you don't treat them as customers and give the majority what they really want, they may really kick you out of the next election."

News media. Similarly to the government, participants had mixed feelings. (HK) "Yes because the reader/listener/viewer are actually spending money on their products. It's like the concept of marketing – give and take." (Singapore) "News media should treat citizens, who are interested in celebrity news which is all gossip and interesting stuff, as customers. The truth won't be available as they would provide the news which the customers want."

### RQ3

Gender. Male and female HK respondents shared slightly different views. One-way ANOVA tests in Table 3 showed statistical significances on primary and secondary schools ( $M = 3.45$  and  $3.67$ ) as well as religious institutions ( $M = 3.53$  and  $3.78$ ). Singaporean men and women, in opposite, shared similar views except on primary and secondary school. Overall, women are more watchful in being treated as customers in social institutions compared to their counterparts.

**Table 3 - One-way ANOVA on gender differences**

	Hospital	Colleges & University	Primary & Secondary Schools	News media	Religious institutions	Govern-ment	Retail stores
Hong Kong (n=738)							
F-value	3.12	2.94	6.94	.23	10.31	1.87	.27
Significance	.07	.08	.00	.63	.00	.17	.59

Singapore (n=645)

F-value	.80	.09	6.85	3.23	2.11	2.28	2.69
Significance	.37	.76	.00	.07	.14	.13	.10

A value of  $p < .05$  is considered significant.

**Race.** HK respondents grew up in the city (n = 598) and those are mostly from Mainland China (n = 140) shared very diverse views. Results showed that consumerism is more established in Hong Kong than in Mainland China. Singaporean Chinese and others, in opposite, shared similar views on many aspects. Singaporean Chinese are typically more educated and concerned about their children’s education. The minority, such as Malays and Indians, are less favourable to see the mainstream media dominated in English or Chinese. Table 4 shows the summary findings.

**Table 4 - One-way ANOVA on Race differences**

	Hospital	Colleges & University	Primary & Secondary Schools	News media	Religious institutions	Government	Retail stores
Hong Kong (n=738)							
F-value	15.68	7.85	14.73	.12	27.00	18.38	.722
Significance	.00	.00	.00	.72	.00	.00	.39
Singapore (n=641)							
F-value	6.37	7.25	1.36	10.17	.89	.06	.00
Significance	.01	.00	.24	.00	.34	.79	.93

A value of  $p < .05$  is considered significant.

To conclude, our findings indicated the attitudinal differences towards the “customer” metaphor across social institutions between Hong Kong and Singapore, although both places are influenced dominantly by Chinese culture. Comparatively, people in HK in different gender and race groups showed greater discrepancies on consumerism in social institutions than Singaporeans. The results of this study point to particularly vivid differences in healthcare, education, and news media context of what specific areas are more and less acceptable in practising marketing. This exploratory study sets the first parameter in measuring the acceptability of marketing in social institutions from the public view in Asian contexts and provides specific areas for consumer marketers and policy makers to “draw the lines.” However, given that this study was conducted via online only, some segments of the population would have been missed out. Future studies could further explore these areas related to the larger socio-political-cultural contexts and explain such differences among “Chinese” in Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as other Chinese-speaking populations. Also, compare and contrast general public views with the views of service providers would provide more insights for the current marketing situation among social institutions.

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