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The relationship between students' consumerist attitudes towards education, academic entitlement and job entitlement: The role of neutralizing techniques

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Abstract

While previous studies have established the type of damage that could be done by students' academic entitlement to the quality of education as well as to society, there is still a dearth of knowledge on the various antecedents of this type of entitlement, its impact on the entitlement behavior of students after graduation, and the underlying mechanisms through which such effects could be facilitated. Thus, by relying on neutralization theory as an anchor, we introduce a research model and propose that student consumerism acts as one of these antecedents and that students who exhibit academic entitlement would equally transfer this attitude to the labor market by engaging in all forms of job entitlement practices, through the mediating influence of neutralization. Making use of a descriptive cross-sectional survey as well as close-ended self-administered and structured questionnaires, research data was elicited from 347 students that were conveniently selected from 2 higher institutions of learning in South Africa. Results from the structural equation modeling reveal that academic entitlement has a significant effect on job entitlement and neutralization. Moreover, neutralization has a significant effect on job entitlement, whereas students' consumerist attitudes have a non-significant effect on academic entitlement. Furthermore, students' consumerist attitudes have a significant effect on neutralization and job entitlement. Lastly, while academic entitlement does not mediate the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement, neutralization partially mediates the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement. While our results provide crucial insight into the damaging and spillover effects of academic entitlement both on educational quality and on society, they also open the window for potential intervention strategies that could be employed by higher educational institutions, education planners, government agencies, and school administrators, especially in situations when there is a need to curb the incidence of entitlement behavior both in school settings and in society.

Keywords: Academic entitlement, Consumerism attitude, Higher educational institutions, Job entitlement, Neutralization.

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1. Introduction

The erosion of academic and intellectual capital has led to what researchers term a consumerist attitude of students towards their education [1]. In his seminal paper, Bourdieu [2] defined academic and intellectual capital as forms of cultural capital or power that originate within the university field and that accrue in response to the managerial, scholarly and scientific practices that take place within the field. The rise of market mechanisms in institutions of higher learning worldwide has led to students conceptualizing themselves as consumers (or customers) of higher education [3]. With universities operating within rapidly changing environments, administrators have had to employ a variety of techniques to respond to these changes [4]

The most common reforms have centered around competition between institutions, driven by large-scale marketization; the declining role of the state as the primary provider of higher education; and a new mode of service provision that meets the needs of service users [5]. The main consequences of this changing landscape have been how students perceive their relationship with their institutions. Research suggests that students now view their degrees as recognizable products, instead of being a social resource [6, 7]. This shift has prompted questions about the consumerist behavior of students, who now view education as a 'service-for-payment' [1, 3, 5, 8].

The rising number of private institutions of higher learning has further created a lot of competition within the higher education sector [9]. Universities have started to advertise "competitive packages" for students, leading to some researchers labelling such practices as the 'amenities arms race' [10]. The dichotomy of paying for education and then being required to work hard to get the qualification has given rise to possible attitudes known as 'academic entitlement [11]. In the education context, individuals with high levels of academic entitlement may hold implicit or explicit expectations that, because they pay large amounts of money towards their education, they deserve additional or special treatment than warranted by their performance [12]. It is also possible that such expectations can be extended to also predict job entitlement, i.e. the belief that getting a qualification entitles one to a good job [13].

Job entitlement has received very little research attention despite many media and popular social science accounts of how young people today apparently expect and demand more than previous generations [14]. The general consensus among entitlement studies is that an excessive sense of entitlement, both in academia and in the workplace, is an undesirable trait [15]. The challenge arising from all this is that if students enter a tertiary institution with the assumption that they will obtain the degree simply as a result of paying fees, they will not see the need to work hard to earn the credentials. Such attitudes may severely compromise the quality of tertiary education by promoting unacceptable behaviors such as academic misconduct [12, 16]. Academic misconduct has raised widespread concern for many countries and educational institutions worldwide. A few recent studies have found a link between academic entitlement and academic misconduct [12, 16, 17], while others have linked academic misconduct with workplace misconduct [18-20].

Given the above findings, students who bring entitlement attitudes into the academic arena and the prospective workplace present behavioral problems for their educators and future managers alike. In academia, these attitudes and behaviors are often reflected in unrealistic expectations of good grades without corresponding hard work [21, 22] but go on to justify them by denying responsibility and coming up with 'reasons' such as claiming that tertiary education is too expensive [23] In the workplace, the said problems are often reflected in inimical work conduct such as demanding a salary increase regardless of poor or average performance [5, 24, 25]. Following the view being held by the neutralization theory, [see; Sykes and Matza [26]] that individuals with delinquent behavior often engage in neutralization as a defensive mechanism to justify their deviant behavior so as to avoid self-blame, the blame of others during and after the commission of a misdeed or violation of a social norm, we aim to make a significant contribution in this study by arguing that students who displays consumerist attitudes, academic entitlement and job entitlement would equally tend to engage in neutralization as strategy to justify these attitudes.

First, given the fact that the consequences of students' academic entitlement have been shown to be highly damaging to society [27] as well as having the tendency to drive the irresponsible behavior of placing learning responsibilities on lecturers, coupled with the fact that its antecedents have not been fully addressed [see; Peirone and Maticka-Tyndale [23]], we aim to make a significant contribution to this field by highlighting the consumerist attitude of students towards education as one of these antecedents.

Furthermore, since there is a plethora of research that has investigated academic entitlement [e.g. [23, 28]] and some others that have focused on students' consumerist attitudes [e.g [5, 23, 29]], keeping in mind that only minimal or no research has focused on the link between these two variables as well as how they may individually or collectively act to render an influence on the job entitlement of students, highlights our endeavor in this study as an important and urgently needed undertaking.

Though some notable studies have previously engaged in the use of neutralization theory in the context of students' academic misconduct [e.g [16, 17]], there is no existing study, however, that has strived to predict the interconnectivity of students' consumerist attitude, their academic entitlement, as well as their job entitlement mentality, particularly from the perspective of neutralization theory. Following the precedence that uses neutralization (justification for wrongdoing) as a theoretical explanation for wrongdoing [30], our study aims to bridge this important gap by extending previous studies on neutralization by contending that students who show a marked level of consumerism would engage in the use of neutralization to justify their engagement in maladaptive behavior such as academic entitlement as well as job entitlement [31], even though they are well aware that such entitlement attitudes are wrong [23]. In short, we aim to offer insight into the interrelationship among these variables by quantifiably estimating the effect of consumerist attitude on the academic entitlement of students, as well as its effect on their job entitlement, by proposing that neutralization plays a mediating role in this relationship.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Students' Consumerist Attitudes

The concept of 'student as a customer' was first recognized in the UK in the Dearing Report (1997), where students were identified as customers of institutions of higher learning because of their fee-paying capacity [32]. Increasingly, this consumer identity appears to be recognized by students, who are now demanding more from the higher education sector than ever before [5, 23, 29]. In trying to understand the role of higher educational institutions in society, [33] it was earlier stated that society consists of numerous 'fields' which are structured social spaces and function in a relatively autonomous manner in relation to other fields. He further added that each field revolves around the development and acquisition of different species of capital.

According to Bourdieu [33] Universities exist in 'the field of higher education,' which has its own value system and modes of operation. The 'capital' invested with value in the field of higher education is termed 'academic capital,' which consists of intellectual or cultural assets rather than economic or political ones. However, Slaughter and Leslie [34] argue that consumerist and other market-related pressures have led to the undiluted influence of economic forces on higher education, resulting in the erosion of academic capital. Furthermore, Naidoo and Jamieson [35] posit that the shift towards the commodification of higher education has transformed educational processes into a form that has an economic worth of its own and has an 'exchange' rather than an intrinsic 'use-value.' Universities themselves have also not helped the situation by adopting business model approaches to higher education. Most institutions have moved toward funding models that are directly linked to student retention and throughput [23]. Given this, students have started to define their relationship with the university in transactional terms and regard qualifications as a return on investment [36]. It is therefore possible that students who consider themselves university consumers/customers feel entitled to positive outcomes [37].

2.2. Academic Entitlement

Concerns have been raised by academics and researchers about what appears to be rising levels of academic entitlement (AE) among students. Recent studies in the United States of America have shown that students have become more demanding regarding what they perceive as their right to receive very good academic grades, notwithstanding their minimum effort to attain those grades [23, 28]. Students who exhibit high levels of entitlement beliefs often demand a significant amount of the lecturer's time and energy [38]. Academic entitlement is related to, but not similar to, general entitlement. General entitlement is typically associated with the personality trait of narcissism, in which the entitled person believes that he or she deserves a particular outcome because he or she is superior to others [39]. Academic entitlement attitudes, on the other hand, are a context-bound, specific set of cognitions and behaviors [17]. They are used as an excuse for demands made by students. Given the attitude of entitlement among students described above, such attitudes threaten the integrity of the educational process and may result in students engaging in academic misconduct. Based on the literature above, the following hypothesis is derived.

H_1: There is a significant and positive relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and academic entitlement.

2.3. Neutralization

Neutralization theory originated from the social deviance discipline and was used to explain delinquency. The theory is based on [26] concept of neutralization as a cognitive strategy for reducing guilt and social stigma associated with deviant behavior. The theory posits that people generally move away from following set rules by downplaying their deviant actions to deflate blame [40].' Although the concept of neutralization was initially applied to delinquent behavior, the theory has been used in different settings such as employee deviance [41] and software piracy [42]. The neutralization techniques have also been used to understand consumer behavior in the context of fair trade [43], impulsive buying [44], shoplifting [45], use of pirated software [46] and music [47].

Furthermore, Juvan and Dolnicar [48] have applied neutralization theory towards pro-environmental behavior in tourism. In the education field, neutralization theory has received extensive scrutiny in relation to academic misconduct [49-51]. Research on neutralization and academic misconduct has found that students were aware that academic dishonesty was wrong however, they persisted in their deviant behavior in minimizing any feelings of guilt or blame [52]. Following on this precedent, this study uses neutralization in an attempt to explain academic entitlement and job entitlement among students. When projected onto academic entitlement and job entitlement, neutralization theory can, at least partially, explain the possible relationships between students' consumerist attitudes and academic entitlement as well as job entitlement. Sykes and Matza [26] posit that people use five major techniques to suppress their 'inner voice' which would be telling them about the immorality of their intended actions: (1) denial of responsibility; (2) denial of injury; (3) denial of victim; (4) appeal to

higher loyalties; and (5) condemnation of the condemners. Later, Minor [53] and Coleman [54] introduced three techniques as extensions to Sykes and Matza [26] theory: (6) Metaphor of the ledger; (7) Defense of necessity; and (8) Defense of entitlement. Below are the justifications that may be used by students in the academic context.

In the context of students, when denying responsibility, students might posit that their actions are a consequence of actions performed by others (universities increasing fees) [55]. When denying injury, students reject the harm associated with their individual actions [56]. They would deny any harm emanating from their high expectations in the learning context or in demanding a job after completion of a qualification. Similarly, when denying victimhood, individuals refuse the idea that their actions have resulted in some kind of damage to someone or something [56]. In the case of students, for example, they may fail to link their expectations of special treatment in class or getting good jobs after completion of their qualifications with any form of harm [57]. When appealing to higher loyalties, such individuals justify their behaviors by referring to those who are valuable to them, such as their family and friends [58]. In the case of students, they will prioritize expectations of their families [59]. The condemnation of condemners is used by individuals to argue that the accusers are not best positioned to tell them about the immorality of their actions. For example, although academic misconduct is unacceptable, students still engage in this activity, arguing that 'everyone does it' [60]. On the metaphor of the ledger: students might claim that previous good acts and rules compliance, i.e., paying fees on time, compensate for their occasional wrongdoing behavior. Concerning the defense of necessity, the offender argues that if the situation requires an act that can result in breaking the rules, no one should feel guilty about such behavior. On the technique of entitlement, the argument used here is that people have a right to receive gains from norm-breaking behavior, which seems to suggest that students may feel entitled to good grades and good jobs after completing their studies. Thus, after taking these into account, the following are anticipated.

H_2: There is a significant and positive relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and neutralization

H_3: There is a significant and positive relationship between students' academic entitlement and neutralization.

2.4. Job Entitlement

Derber [61] was the first researcher to discuss the concept of job entitlement, which he defined as the belief that achieving a higher education should be rewarded with a good job. Contemporary researchers [39, 62] have also expressed concern that young Americans have a heightened sense of entitlement with respect to education and jobs. However, apart from these few studies, the development of job entitlement beliefs during early adulthood has received virtually no empirical attention [63]. Whereas much of the previous work has focused on workplace entitlement, this study focuses on job entitlement, as this concept has received very little attention from researchers. Job entitlement is the belief that one is entitled to a job after completing a qualification, while workplace entitlement is the belief that one is entitled to positive outcomes in the workplace [64].

Research on workplace entitlement has found links with negative workplace behaviors such as an inability to accept negative feedback, expectations of rewards that are unrealistic, conflicts with supervisors, decreased job satisfaction, and high turnover intentions [39, 65]. Following on the footsteps of Derber [61], this study focuses on the importance of contextualizing job entitlement research for students who are not yet employed and linking it to academic entitlement and students' consumerist attitudes. It is plausible to expect academically entitled students to also hold the belief that achieving a higher education should be rewarded with a good job or that, after paying large amounts for their education, they are entitled to a good job. Given the discussion above, the following hypotheses are derived.

H_4: There is a significant and positive relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement.

H_5: There is a significant and positive relationship between students' academic entitlement and job entitlement.

H_6: There is a significant and positive relationship between neutralization and job entitlement.

H_7: Academic entitlement mediates the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement.

H_7: Neutralization mediates the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement

Having considered the literature review and derived hypotheses, the theoretical framework is discussed below.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in the current study can be traced back to Sykes and Matza [26] neutralization theory. At the center of this theory is the justification for wrongdoing by the wrongdoer. A common finding among researchers is that academic misconduct is associated with neutralizing attitudes that justify cheating behavior [66]. Neutralization is defined by researchers as a defensive mechanism adapted before, during, and after the commission of a misdeed meant to justify and reduce self-blame and the blame of others for violating accepted norms. Therefore, although students know that academic entitlement and job entitlement are wrong, they justify wrongdoing, deny responsibility, and come up with 'reasons' such as claiming there is too much work required or that university education is expensive; therefore, they cannot afford to fail [67]. Based on neutralization theory, students can escape negative impacts on their self-esteem by using a deflecting blame mechanism, which enables them to neutralize their wrongdoing with seemingly valid reasons to mitigate the cognitive dissonance of their behavior [68]. Having grounded the study on an existing theory as well as previous literature, below in Figure 1 is the proposed conceptual framework for the study.

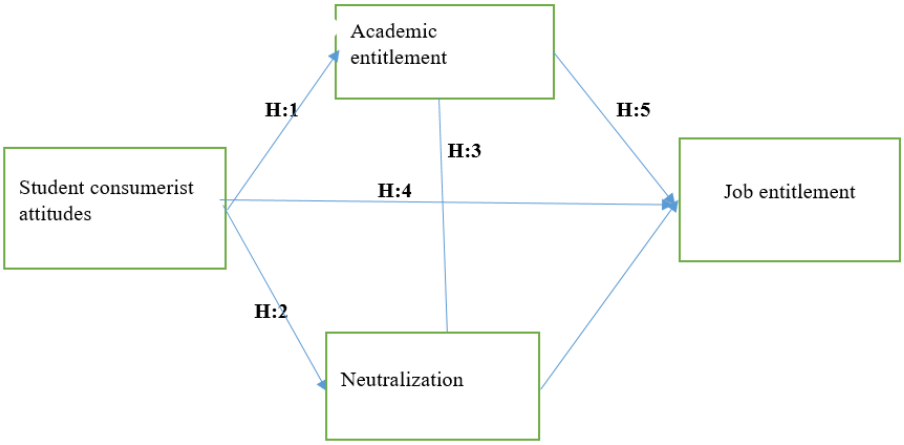


Figure 1.
Proposed Conceptual Model.

3. Methods

3.1. Procedure

Data Collection Instrument, Google Forms was used to administer the survey. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from two institutions of higher learning in South Africa. One is a private college with over 8,000 students, and the other is a public university with over 30,000 students. Study participants were recruited via an email sent to students at campus 1 and campus 2 through the Registrars' office. Participants received a link created to access the questionnaire. A cover letter, ethics clearance certificates from the institutions, and a link to the questionnaire were included. Based on our sample, 71.8% of respondents identify as male, 27.7% identify as female, while 0.6% of the respondents prefer not to say. Regarding age, 54.2% of the respondents are between the ages of 18 and 20 years. Furthermore, 57.2% of the respondents are in the Commerce department; in addition to that, 13.9% of respondents are in the Engineering department. Lastly, 51% of the respondents attend a private institution, while 49% of respondents are in a public institution. See Table 2.

3.2. Measurement

3.2.1. Consumerist Attitudes Towards Learning

The Consumerist Attitude towards Education Scale developed by Fairchild and Crage [10] was used in this study on a 5-point Likert scale. Student responses ranged from 1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree. Examples of items on this scale include 'I think of education as a product I am buying' and 'my relationship with the university/college is similar to the relationship between a customer and a seller.' Higher scores are indicative of a more consumerist attitude toward education. The reliability for this scale was previously found to be 0.66.

3.2.2. Academic Entitlement

Academic entitlement was measured using a six-item subset of the fifteen-item AE scale used by Greenberger et al. [69]. This scale has also previously been used by Stiles et al. [16]. Some examples of items from this scale include the following: 'If I have explained to my lecturer that I am trying hard, I think he/she should give me some consideration with respect to my course marks.' 'Lecturers often give me lower grades than I deserve on assignments.'

3.2.3. Neutralisation

For neutralization, the modified 11-item scale consisting of personal neutralization attitudes developed by Haines et al. [49] was used. It is the only instrument that has been developed for higher education. It reflects neutralizing attitudes as they pertain to academic misconduct. It was therefore considered to be relevant for the study. Neutralization was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, (from 1= "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"). An example of an item is 'cheating is okay if someone does it to help a friend'. Cheating is okay if someone is in danger of losing his/her scholarship due to low marks. The inter-item reliability for the Neutralization variable was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .94). This study offers an important contribution to the literature regarding neutralization theory because, rather than relying on self-reporting to an inventory of actual involvement in deviant behavior, the instrument indirectly measured neutralization of misconduct, thus reducing bias.

3.2.4. Job Entitlement

To create the summative measure of job entitlement, items from two sources [23, 61] were adapted. Derber constructed a composite measure of job entitlement from four items selected on the basis of exploratory factor analysis from seven items expressing various forms of entitlement beliefs. This measure places job entitlement in the context of the respondent's unemployment. It was considered to be particularly appropriate for students who are, by definition, mostly unemployed. Responses ranged from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree." Examples of items are: 'the amount of time, money, and effort I expended in school entitles me to a very good job' and 'if there are no jobs available in my chosen occupation, the government has a responsibility either to create a job in this area or retrain me for another career of my choice.'

Conceptually, we assumed that the students' feeling entitled to government support until finding a job of their own choice would provide a concrete measure of the strength of feelings of entitlement to a job.

3.2.5. Control Variables

To control for possible spurious relationships between students' consumerist attitudes, academic entitlement, and job entitlement, gender, age, and type of institution were controlled for. The majority of existing research on gender and entitlement has been conducted in the workplace setting, with results suggesting that women generally earn less than men and report less income entitlement than men do [70, 71]. Some previous research has indicated that age is not related to academic entitlement [69] while other studies find a connection [28]. Some studies suggest that students from private or more exclusive universities may exhibit high levels of entitlement due to factors such as smaller class sizes, personalized attention, and higher academic resources [72].

3.3. Analysis

The structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was conducted using Smart PLS4. SEM is a flexible and comprehensive methodology for representing, estimating, and testing a theoretical model to explain the maximum variance possible [72]. This analysis evaluates the structural relationships of the variables specified in the conceptual model. The report starts with the demographic distributions of the respondents and other descriptive statistics. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to evaluate the normal distribution of the data. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which includes reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity, was conducted, and the structural model analyses (standardized regression path) were carried out. The SEM methodology includes confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural model analysis [73]. The CFA assesses the validity of the measurements, while the structural model analysis tests the research hypotheses specified in the conceptual models. Following [74] both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability coefficient were utilized in accessing the reliability of the items.

3.4. Results

Detecting outliers is crucial for maintaining the integrity of statistical analyses. We employed the Multivariate Outliers approach, specifically the Mahalanobis Distance, to identify any unusual data points. The dataset contained eleven (11) outliers. These were removed to ensure the reliability of subsequent analyses. Since the assessment of the normality of data is fundamental for selecting appropriate statistical tests, we utilized two tests, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk, to evaluate the normal distribution of the data. In statistics, the null hypothesis for normality tests states that the data in a sample comes from a population that follows a normal distribution. Normality tests are used to determine whether a dataset is significantly different from a normal distribution. The null hypothesis (H_0) states that the variable is normally distributed, and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) states that the variable is not normally distributed. Thus,

If $p \leq 0.05$: then the null hypothesis will be rejected (i.e., the variable is NOT normally distributed).

If $p > 0.05$: then the null hypothesis will not be rejected (i.e., the variable MAY BE normally distributed).

According to the normality test results in Table 1, the data did not meet the criteria for normality.

Table 1.
Tests of Normality.

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	**df**	**Sig.**	**Statistic**	**df**	**Sig.**
Academic Entitlement	0.090	347	0.000	0.988	347	0.005
Student Consumerist Attitudes	0.094	347	0.000	0.986	347	0.002
Neutralisation	0.099	347	0.000	0.945	347	0.000
Job Entitlement	0.074	347	0.000	0.983	347	0.000

Table 2.
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

		n	%
Gender	Male	249	71.8
	Female	96	27.7
	Prefer not to say	2	0.6
	Total	347	100
Age	18 – 20	188	54.2
	21– 25	107	30.8
	26 - 30	52	15
	Total	347	100
Faculty	Commerce	57.1	57.2
	Engineering	13.8	13.9
	Science	9.5	9.5
	Medical	2.9	2.9
	Other	16.4	16.5
	Total	99.7	100
	Missing	0.3	
	Total	100	
Institution	Public	170	49
	Private	177	51
	Total	347	100

Central tendency measures were conducted to assess how centered the distribution of the constructs involved in the study is. A five-point Likert scale, where the value 1 corresponds to "Strongly disagree" and the value 5 corresponds to "Strongly agree," was applied to measure the constructs: Academic Entitlement, Student Consumerist Attitudes, Neutralization, Job Entitlement. The median serves as another important measure of central tendency on the five-point Likert scale used to measure the constructs: Academic Entitlement, Student Consumerist Attitudes, Neutralization, and Job Entitlement. The median represents the middle value of the dataset when arranged in numerical order. In this context, if the median score for the constructs is 3, it signifies that half of the respondents provided a score of 3 or lower, indicating a tendency to be neutral or disagree with the statements, whereas a median score of 3 or higher indicates a tendency towards neutrality or agreement with the statements related to the constructs. Thus, based on the results (See Table 3), we can conclude that respondents seem to agree with the statements regarding Student Consumerist Attitudes and Job Entitlement (Median scores > 3). Meanwhile, for Academic Entitlement and Neutralization, respondents seem to be neutral or disagree with the statements regarding these constructs (Median scores < 3).

Table 3.
Measure of Central Tendency.

Constructs	Items	Median	Std. Deviation	Conclusion
Academic Entitlement	Ent1	3.00	1.120	The results indicate that most respondents tend to be neutral or disagree with the statements regarding academic entitlement because the average median score is below 3.
	Ent2	3.00	1.148	
	Ent3	3.00	1.088	
	Ent4	2.00	1.054	
	Ent5	3.00	0.979	
	Ent6	2.00	0.881	
	OVERALL MEDIAN & STD. DEV.	2.83	0.656	
Student Consumerist Attitudes	Cons1	4.00	1.181	Most of the respondents tend to be neutral regarding the statements relating to Student Consumerist Attitudes because of the average median score (Median = 3.20).
	Cons2	4.00	1.091	
	Cons3	4.00	0.965	
	Cons4	3.00	1.171	
	Cons5	3.00	1.132	
	OVERALL MEDIAN & STD. DEV.	3.20	0.737	
Neutralisation	Nuet1	2.00	0.853	The results show that most respondents tend to disagree with the statements regarding neutralization because the average median score is below 3.
	Nuet2	2.00	0.928	
	Nuet3	2.00	0.983	
	Nuet4	2.00	0.926	
	Nuet5	2.00	0.822	
	Nuet6	2.00	0.787	
	Nuet7	2.00	0.940	

	OVERALL MEDIAN & STD. DEV.	2.00	0.711	
Job Entitlement	JobEnt1	4.00	1.073	The average median indicates that most of the respondents tend to be neutral regarding the statements about Job Entitlement (Median = 3.40)
	JobEnt2	4.00	0.852	
	JobEnt3	3.00	1.122	
	JobEnt4	3.00	1.104	
	JobEnt5	3.00	1.190	
	OVERALL MEDIAN & STD. DEV.	3.40	0.751	

Confirmatory factor Analysis (CFA) is the step of SEM that deals with the measurement models, that is, the relationships between observed measures or indicators and latent variables or constructs [75]. This validity assessment includes reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity. Reliability evaluates the extent to which the measurement of a phenomenon provides stable and consistent results [76]. The scale's reliability in SEM studies is generally assessed with Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability [74]. The required cut-off value for Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) is 0.7, although 0.6 is sometimes permissible [77]. Results in Table 4 show that Cronbach's Alpha ranges from 0.716 to 0.855, indicating an average good level of internal consistency of all four constructs considered in the model. These Cronbach's alpha results are further supported by composite reliability (CR) coefficients, which ranged from 0.729 to 0.863. Based on both Cronbach's alpha and the Composite Reliability, all constructs involved in this study are considered reliable.

Convergent validity is "the extent to which a set of items only measures one latent variable in the same direction" [78]. The results provide support for this assumption because all the factor loadings are above or equal to 0.5. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) estimates are all above 0.5. See Table 4. Discriminant validity is how a latent variable or construct discriminates from other latent variables [76]. According to Fornell and Larcker [79], the square root of the AVE is expected to be above the inter-construct correlation coefficients. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing correlations between all pairs of constructs with the square root of the AVE of each construct [77]. Correlations greater than the square root of AVE indicate poor discriminant validity between the constructs involved. The results in Table 5 suggest that there are no discriminant validity concerns between the constructs. The result is further confirmed by the HTMT results in Table 6, with constructs having common variances over 0.9. The HTMT test generates ratios that assess how any two constructs share common variance, and the ratios are not supposed to exceed 0.9 [80].

Table 4.
Statistical Evidence of Reliability and Convergent Validity.

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	P-value	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Final number of items and initials
Academic Entitlement	Ent1	0.869	***	0.826	0.828	0.741	3(6)
	Ent2	0.865	***				
	Ent3	0.848	***				
Student Consumerist Attitudes	Cons1	0.757	***	0.722	0.729	0.638	3(5)
	Cons2	0.809	***				
	Cons5	0.829	***				
Neutralisation	Nuet1	0.700	***	0.855	0.863	0.635	5(7)
	Nuet2	0.842	***				
	Nuet3	0.841	***				
	Nuet4	0.855	***				
	Nuet7	0.734	***				
Job Entitlement	JobEnt1	0.686	***	0.716	0.742	0.541	4(5)
	JobEnt2	0.661	***				
	JobEnt3	0.814	***				
	JobEnt4	0.771	***				

Note: *Indicates the significance of the factor at 99% confidence interval.

Table 5.
Fornell and Larker Assessment.

	Academic Entitlement	Job Entitlement	Neutralisation	Student Consumerist Attitude
Academic Entitlement	0.861			
Job Entitlement	0.283	0.736		
Neutralisation	0.180	0.249	0.797	
Student Consumerist Attitude	0.087	0.193	0.186	0.799

Table 6.
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Test.

	Academic Entitlement	Job Entitlement	Neutralisation	Student Consumerist Attitude
Academic Entitlement				
Job Entitlement	0.371			
Neutralisation	0.213	0.303		
Student Consumerist Attitude	0.102	0.267	0.226	

The structural model examined the path coefficients (β), Coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). The model was developed and tested to appraise the significance of the predictors. According to the results, the empirical model explains 0.7% (R^2) of Academic Entitlement variance and 13.9% (R^2) of Job Entitlement. Moreover, the model accounts for 6.2% (R^2) of neutralization. These findings are summarized in Table 7. In addition, the graphical representation of the structural model is displayed in Figure 2.

Table 7.
Empirical Model of the Variance in Academic Entitlement, Job Entitlement and Neutralization.

	R-square
Academic Entitlement	0.007
Job Entitlement	0.139
Neutralisation	0.062

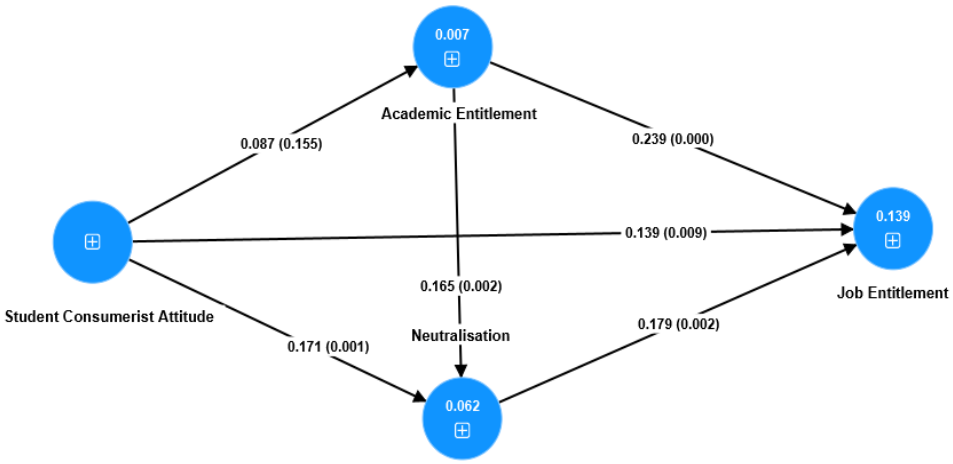


Figure 2.
Graphical Representation of the Structural Model.

3.5. Hypothesis Testing

Table 8 establishes the direct effect of the independent variable's predictive effects on dependent variables, while Table 9 displays the result of the mediation analysis of the indirect effect of the independent variable on dependent variables, through academic entitlement and neutralization techniques. The Beta values indicate the direction and strength of the relationships, while the p-values (sig.) estimate the significance of the predictive effect [81]. The significance of the relationship is supported if the p-value is below 0.05. An $f^2 \leq 0.14$ indicates a small effect size. While an f^2 between 0.15 and 0.34 (inclusive) indicates a medium effect, and an $f^2 \geq 0.35$ is considered a large effect size.

Table 8.
Standardized Regression Weights and Hypothesis Conclusion.

Path Coefficient	Beta value (0)	f^2	P Value	Conclusion
Academic Entitlement -> Job Entitlement	0.239	0.064	0.000	Academic Entitlement has a positive (β = 0.239) and small (f^2 <0.14) significant effect (P < 0.05) on Job Entitlement. Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted.
Academic Entitlement -> Neutralisation	0.165	0.029	0.002	Academic Entitlement has a positive (β = 0.165) and small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$) significant (P < 0.05) effect on Neutralisation. Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted.
Neutralisation -> Job Entitlement	0.179	0.035	0.002	Neutralisation has a positive (β = 0.179) and small ($f^2 \leq$ 0.14) significant (P < 0.05) effect on Job Entitlement.

				Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted.
Students' Consumerist Attitudes -> Academic Entitlement	0.087	0.008	0.155	Students' Consumerist Attitudes have a positive (β = 0.087), but small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$) and non-significant (P > 0.05) effect on Academic Entitlement. Therefore, this hypothesis is rejected.
Students' Consumerist Attitudes -> Job Entitlement	0.139	0.022	0.009	Students' Consumerist Attitudes have a positive (β = 0.139) and but small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$) and significant (P < 0.05) effect on Job Entitlement. Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted.
Students' Consumerist Attitudes -> Neutralisation	0.171	0.031	0.001	Students' Consumerist Attitudes have a positive (β=0.171) and small (f2 ≤ 0.14) effect on Neutralisation. Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted.

Table 9.
Mediation Analysis.

Independent variables	**Dependent variables**	**Direct Effect**		**Indirect Effect**		**Findings**
Mediation = Academic Entitlement		**β**	**p**	**β**	**p**	
Students' Consumerist Attitudes	Job Entitlement	0.139	0.009	0.021	0.203	Academic Entitlement does not mediate the relationship between Students' Consumerist Attitudes and Job Entitlement because the indirect effect is non-significant (P > 0.05). Therefore, this hypothesis is rejected.
Mediation = Neutralisation						
Students' Consumerist Attitudes	Job Entitlement			0.031	0.032	Neutralisation mediates the relationship between Students' Consumerist Attitudes and Job Entitlement (p-value < 0.05). Furthermore, this mediation is partial because the direct effect of Students' Consumerist Attitudes on Job Entitlement is also significant (0.009 < 0.05). Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted.

4. Discussion

The rise of market mechanisms in institutions of higher learning worldwide has led to students conceptualizing themselves as consumers who have a right to additional or special treatment that is not warranted by their academic performance, as a result of the large amounts of money perceived to have been invested in their education. This dichotomy of paying for education and then being required to work hard to obtain the qualification has given rise to the emergence of student academic entitlement as a highly debated topic among researchers, as well as school administrators and planners. Given the fact that the consequences of this type of entitlement have been shown to be highly undesirable and damaging to society and the overall output of higher education (see; [27]), understanding the factors that serve as its drivers, as well as the different dimensions its manifestation may take, not only makes a significant contribution to the literature and theoretical development in this area but is also critical for the development of accurate policy and program responses that foster a more responsible mindset among students, as well as a more productive higher educational sector.

Thus, making use of neutralization theory in a 7-hypotheses framework, we channeled our focus on the Higher Education Sector of South Africa and proposed a research model that highlights consumerism attitudes among students as a driver for two components of entitlement, namely academic entitlement and job entitlement. In addition, it is also proposed in our model that neutralization practices would act as a significant mediator in this interrelationship. Based on our analysis, our data failed to provide support for the first hypothesis, which by implication means there is a lack of any significant relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and academic entitlement. In short, students' consumerist attitudes have a positive (β = 0.087), but small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$) and non-significant (P > 0.05) effect on academic entitlement. Surprisingly, this particular finding contradicts our initial assumption that students now see the commodification of higher education as an economic exchange that entitles them to academic degrees and special treatment from their lecturers, even though they have not deemed it fit to work hard to earn these accolades. Unlike other previous studies that lend support to this assumption [1, 5, 8, 36, 82] what this result suggests is that, contrary to the widely held opinion that consumerist pressures have led to the undiluted influence of economic forces on higher education, leading to the erosion of academic capital [see; [34]], the possession of an academic entitlement attitude among students does not have any significant link with the consumerism trait and that students who see themselves as consumers are not prone to be academically entitled. In other words, the academic community is still popularly viewed by these students as a community that has its own distinct value system and modes of operation, which are designed to foster the formation of human capital by creating intellectual and cultural assets rather than economic or political

assets [see; [33]]. This type of unexpected finding may be due to the high-power distance culture in most African higher educational sectors, whereby there is a significant acceptance of hierarchical structure, with students generally deferring to instructors, professors, and other constituted authorities with minimal questioning [83]. Thus, as a result of the fear that may have emanated from this perceived hierarchical structure, students who view themselves as customers may still find it difficult to develop the attitude or belief of making unwarranted demands from their lecturers as well as putting their learning responsibilities on them. Furthermore, in line with our expectations, we obtain support for hypothesis 2 and conclude that there is a significant and positive relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and neutralization ($\beta = 0.165$) and small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$) significant ($P < 0.05$), meaning that students who are characterized by consumerism traits also tend to engage in neutralization practices. This result is in line with the submission by Sykes and Matza [26], who argued that students who have this kind of trait within the academic community are likely to be characterized by neutralization tendencies, with which they are likely to provide a justification for their wrongdoings. In this context, they may tend to make use of the metaphor of the ledger technique to suppress their inner circle by imbibing themselves with the opinion that their compliance with fee payment regulations should compensate for other wrongdoings from them.

With respect to hypothesis (3), our data also revealed that a significant and positive relationship exists between neutralization and students' academic entitlement, positive ($\beta = 0.179$) and small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$), significant ($P < 0.05$), meaning that acceptance is also obtained for this hypothesis. What this result seems to suggest is that students who have the tendency to suppress their inner circle and provide justification for their wrongdoing also have the tendency to transfer this type of practice into the way they view their studies by developing some set of cognition and behavior which hold implicit or explicit expectations that because they pay large amounts of money towards their education, they deserve additional or special treatment than warranted by their performance [17]. Apart from further confirming the argument behind the neutralization theory [see; [26], it also lay credence to previous empirical studies (see; [16, 17, 30]] where a direct link has been established between neutralization practices and the tendency to engage in academic misconduct and other form of maladaptive behaviors. Relatedly, our data also provide evidence of a significant and positive relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement ($\beta = 0.139$) and a small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$), significant ($P < 0.05$) leading to the acceptance of hypothesis (4), and also a confirmation of our expectation that students who believe in paying large amounts for their education are also likely to hold the view that they are entitled to a good job [see; [13, 61]]. According to Naidoo and Jamieson [35], since the shift towards the commodification of higher education has led to the transformation of educational processes into a form that has an economic worth of its own and an 'exchange', rather than an intrinsic 'use-value', students are beginning to view their qualifications as a return on investment [36] that provides them with entitlement to job opportunities regardless of whether they have the merit and skill set for such jobs or not. This finding depicts the position of Krahn and Galambos [14] on how young people today apparently expect and demand more than previous generations did. It simply means that they enter tertiary institutions with the assumption that they will obtain the degree simply because they are paying fees, without necessarily working hard to earn the credentials, while at the same time transferring the attitude to the labor market by having an unrealistic expectation of unwarranted high-paying jobs [21, 22] which altogether also poses a danger to the overall well-being of the labor market.

Furthermore, our analysis also provides support for hypothesis (5), which predicts a significant and positive relationship between students' academic entitlement and job entitlement ($\beta = 0.239$) and a small ($f^2 < 0.14$) significant effect ($P < 0.05$), thereby providing support for the entitlement literature that argues that an excessive sense of entitlement acts as an undesirable trait that can have far-reaching effects on many spheres of life [17] as well as for the findings by Lippmann et al. [38], where students who have high levels of entitlement are shown to often place their responsibilities on others rather than on themselves. Apart from strengthening the assumption behind the neutralization theory, which holds that individuals who commit delinquent behavior tend to adopt neutralizing strategies to justify their misdeeds and reduce self-blame and the blame of others for violating accepted norms, even though they are well aware that these behaviors are wrong, it also underscores the overwhelmingly damaging effect of academic entitlement in the sense that it's not just limited to the academic environment but also extends to society as a whole [see; [27].

Furthermore, and in line with the findings on hypothesis (1), our data also revealed that academic entitlement does not have any significant mediating effect on the relationship between students' consumerism attitude and job entitlement (indirect effect $\beta = 0.021$), ($p = 0.203$), ($P > 0.05$), which implies that we fail to obtain support for hypothesis (6) that academic entitlement is a mediator in this relationship. These findings reiterate our previous argument concerning hypothesis (1) above that the possession of an academic entitlement attitude among students does not have any significant link with the consumerism trait and that students who see themselves as consumers are not prone to be academically entitled. More importantly, it reflects that regardless of any form of entitlement factor in relation to unwarranted academic rewards, students who see their relationship with their institution as being transformational would also feel entitled to a good job after graduation, even though the inherent skills to carry out the job may be lacking in them.

Finally, our findings support our initial assumption that there is a significant and positive relationship between neutralization and job entitlement ($\beta = 0.179$) and small ($f^2 \leq 0.14$) significant ($P < 0.05$), and that neutralization partially mediates the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement (indirect effect $\beta = 0.031$), ($p = 0.032$), ($P < 0.05$) thereby implying that support is obtained for both hypothesis (6) and hypothesis (8). Thus, with these findings, we confirm the assertion by Güğerçin [31] that when neutralization theory is linked to students' consumerist attitudes, they will engage in neutralization to justify maladaptive behaviors. The findings suggest that students who are allowed to view the education sector as a service-for-payment organization are likely to translate this form of attitude into an enhanced sense of entitlement to the kind of academic success that befits their investment, which would consequently lead to the belief that such success entitles them to a good job. According to the neutralization theory, even though students are aware that a particular

set of deviant behavior is wrong, they tend to routinely persist in it and then make use of neutralization as a strategy to suppress their 'inner voice', which would be telling them about the immorality of their intended actions. Thus, it can be clearly observed in this study that students who have traits of consumerism also have the belief that it is their right to be provided with a good job after graduation [55]. But knowing fully well that the education institution should be viewed as a den of academic capital which should be seen as a intellectual or cultural, rather than economic or political assets [see; Bourdieu [33]] as well as that entitlement trait act as a violation of social norm, they would tend to build up a defensive mechanism by denying responsibility for their wrong and coming up with justifiable reasons for their actions, or engage in deflecting blame mechanism, which enables them to neutralize their wrongdoing with seemingly valid reasons, to mitigate the cognitive dissonance of their behavior [68]. Thus, in a related term, our finding here also corroborates other empirical findings [e.g [16, 17]] where the effect of neutralization on immoral conduct was markedly demonstrated.

By and large, unlike previous studies that primarily focused on examining neutralization in the context of academic misconduct [16, 17] our research explicitly adopts the theoretical approach to neutralization as laid down by Sykes and Matza [26] and identifies the construct of consumerism as an antecedent that triggers a predominating sense of entitlement, whose sense of guilt or shame is usually suppressed by engaging in the techniques of neutralization. Similarly, this approach allows us to determine the connectedness/interrelationship among the combination of student consumerism, academic entitlement, neutralization traits, and job entitlement, thus singling out our endeavor as the first of its kind within the academic literature of consumerism and student entitlement. With our endeavor, we have been able to prove that while students who see themselves as consumers of their higher educational institution may not necessarily feel entitled to unwarranted academic rewards because of their financial investment, they are nevertheless likely to engage in neutralization to justify their sense of entitlement to a good job after graduation as a result of this investment. This is more so as evidence has been established by our research endeavor that students who have a sense of entitlement to unwarranted academic rewards as a result of their financial contribution to the school are also likely to have this kind of immoral and delinquent attitude transferred to the labor market by emphasizing that it is the responsibility of society to provide them with a good job as a result of their financial investment in their academic degrees. Though this set of attitudes/expectations or maladaptive behavior may seem immoral and in contrast with acceptable social norms, our research also makes a significant contribution by providing evidence that an important underlying mechanism that acts as support for them is the engagement in neutralization by students, thus implying that neutralization practices serve as an important mediating variable in the above relationship.

5.1. Limitation and Suggestion for Future Research

Despite its plethora of strengths and its meaningful contribution to the literature, this study also has its own limitations that are worth noting. First, like many other cross-sectional studies, there is a restriction on making use of our data in establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between and among our explanatory and outcome variables. Thus, to overcome this limitation, prospective future researchers are encouraged to utilize a more sophisticated research design, such as longitudinal or multiple waves studies, to provide the means of drawing causal inferences concerning the nature of the relationships among these variables, as well as to account for the effect of time and longevity in this type of relationship.

Second, since we relied primarily on the rating scale system for the collation of our data, whereby respondents were required to share their perceptions regarding the issues in focus, this reliance on self-reported data has been linked to socially desirable responses and other forms of response bias [84]. Hence, by taking this into account, researchers conducting future similar studies may strive to integrate the social desirability construct into their model as a control variable.

Third, as our data in this study suggest the absence of any significant relationship between consumerism attitude and academic entitlement, which is quite contrary to our earlier expectation, we suggest that prospective researchers should integrate other mechanisms to delineate the association between these two variables. Some of the potential variables that could serve as this kind of underlying mechanism could be in the form of leadership style and organizational culture, as these two variables also have the potential to serve as determinants of the kind of attitude that students may tend to cultivate in terms of what they perceive as what they are entitled to from constituted authorities in their respective higher institutions of learning (see; [83].

5.2. Implication for Practice

The findings in this study offer critical insights and implications for higher educational institutions, planners, government, and administrators. It shows that the negative consequences of academic entitlement cannot be restricted only to the higher education community but transcend to the overall larger society. For instance, since students with an entitlement attitude towards an unwarranted academic degree are also likely to see it as unimportant to prepare themselves to pass job interviews as well as to see performance as a yardstick for promotion and organizational success, it means that school administrators, government, and business organizations have the responsibility of making use of sensitization campaigns to foster enlightenment about the dangers of entitlement attitudes both on tertiary education quality, on industrial output, and on the need for young people to embrace the principles of human ethics. These types of campaigns should be devised as an integral part of the school curriculum, matriculation ceremonies, and convocation ceremonies.

Furthermore, education policymakers, the legislature, as well as relevant government ministries are encouraged to enact the relevant laws, policies, and directives that emphasize the need for the management of the higher education sector to start shying away from the large-scale marketization that currently pervades the sector. Also, there is a need for reforms that seek to increase government funding for these institutions in order to limit their dependence on tuition fee payments, as this would go a long way in demarketing the service-for-payment orientation that currently prevails among many students. In cases where the government may not be able to make up for all the required funding, commercial organizations, Non-Governmental

Organizations (NGOs), philanthropists, and other private individuals are encouraged to take up the mantle of leadership, as they too have the chance of reaping immense benefits from a national higher education sector that thrives on a value system that supports moral discipline, hard work, meritorious reward, and an environment that is seen as a promoter of academic capital, which consists of intellectual or cultural, rather than economic or political assets.

5.3. Conclusion

The present study investigates the association between students' consumerist attitudes and academic entitlement, neutralization, and job entitlement. The study further tests the mediating role of academic entitlement as well as neutralization on the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement. The results indicated that academic entitlement has a significant effect on job entitlement and neutralization. Moreover, neutralization has a significant effect on job entitlement, whereas students' consumerist attitudes have a non-significant effect on academic entitlement. Furthermore, students' consumerist attitudes have a significant effect on neutralization and job entitlement. Lastly, while academic entitlement does not mediate the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement, neutralization partially mediates the relationship between students' consumerist attitudes and job entitlement.

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