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Strategies Restaurant Managers Use to Improve Brand Equity

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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2020

Abstract

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by

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MS, University of Phoenix, 2009

BS, Savannah State University, 2004

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Failure to establish brand equity can adversely impact the sustainability of a business organization. Upscale full-service restaurant managers who fail to establish brand equity risk intricate assets to enhance shareholder value. Grounded in the brand equity theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer retention strategies upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. The participants included 3 senior-level managers in 3 upscale full-service restaurants in the southeastern United States who successfully developed customer retention strategies to improve brand equity. Data were collected using (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents. Data analysis through methodological triangulation and thematic analysis revealed 4 themes related to increasing customer retention to improve brand equity: (a) brand differentiation through competitive advantage, (b) premium products and quality experiences, (c) employee engagement, and (d) word of mouth and online platforms. Managers of upscale full-service restaurants could increase customer retention and improve brand equity by implementing strategies related to exceptional cuisine, superior service, personalization, and employee engagement. The implications for positive social change include the potential to support the welfare of the local citizens and owners of upscale full-service restaurants across the southeastern United States by providing strategies necessary to increase customer retention, improve job sustainability, and encourage job creation.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this doctoral study to my divine trinity. It is this divine trinity that established the foundation of who I am. To my beloved mother, thank you for your unconditional love, support, and steadfast guidance. Your genuine, unequivocal spirit has always believed and desired the best for me in every facet of life. To my fearless father, thank you for teaching me dedication, loyalty, and commitment through your disciplined Army War Veteran mentality. Though a man of few words, you encouraged the warrior within me. Finally, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, thank you for giving me the inspiration, wisdom, and strength to persevere through this extremely challenging, yet rewarding journey.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to explore the strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers used to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. Upscale full-service restaurants are characterized by fine-dining experiences in luxurious environments with fancy ambiences that have dedicated high-priced menu course items with guest checks that average $50 (Hwang & Ok, 2013). The National Restaurant Association (2017) found that of the $800 billion in revenue earned from the restaurant industry in 2017, $260 billion of those sales were generated from casual dining, fine dining, and family dining restaurants, which are all encompassed in the table service restaurant sector. Managers and marketers should identify customer and brand equity as intricate assets to enhance shareholder value (Bick, 2009). In today's global economy, consumers influence a brand's value in the market based on what they are willing to pay for an organization's product or services. The goal of this qualitative case study was to offer upscale full-service restaurant managers marketing strategies to increase customer retention to improve brand loyalty.

Background of the Problem

Restaurant managers gain relevant information regarding customers' tastes and preferences through daily interactions. Despite growing empirical data on customer loyalty, Nam, Ekinci, and Whyatt (2011) noted that both brand image and brand loyalty play a distinctive role in solidifying customers' perceptions through successful experiences with a brand. Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa (2017) proposed customer relationship management (CRM), which is a strategy implemented by an organization to understand customers' behaviors through meaningful communication intended to promote increased customer loyalty with new and existing customers. In addition to understanding customer preferences, tastes, and behaviors, Shilpa and Rajnish (2013) found that modern strategies allow managers the ability to focus on varying dynamics of customer interactions with the business.

Customer loyalty derives from the decisions of a consumer to repeatedly make purchases from a single establishment, regardless of what competitors may offer (Farida & Ardyan, 2018). In highly competitive markets, managers focus on achieving customer loyalty as it is more cost effective to sustain current customers than attain new (Mabkhot, Shaari, & Salleh, 2017). Within the restaurant industry, developing brand equity provides businesses with the opportunity to increase revenue and maintain sustainability (Kim & Kim, 2004). Espinosa, Ortinau, Krey, and Monahan (2018) questioned the importance of restaurant managers maintaining brand image and customer loyalty as a caveat to enhancing brand equity and encouraging repeat business.

Problem Statement

Upscale full-service restaurant managers seek ways to satisfy and retain customers in a competitive industry (Han, Kim, Lee, & Song, 2018). Wilson and Choi (2019) reported data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics demonstrating that U.S. consumers spend an average of 13% of their household expenditures on food, with only 6% accounting for food consumed away from home at restaurants. The general business problem is that upscale full-service restaurant managers without customer retention strategies experience poor customer retention, poor brand equity, and lower profits. The specific business problem is that some upscale full-service restaurant managers lack customer retention strategies to improve brand equity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. The target population included all senior- and mid-level managers in three upscale full-service restaurants in the southeastern United States who have successfully developed customer retention strategies to improve brand equity. Positive social change may occur as restaurant managers are able to increase clientele and stay in business, thereby increasing employment and local tax bases.

Nature of the Study

For this multiple case study, I used the qualitative methodology to explore customer retention strategies to improve brand equity. Researchers use qualitative methods to provide answers to a series of who, what, where, when, and how open-ended questions for the exploration of methodologies in various fields (Leung, 2018). Additionally, researchers use qualitative studies to provide a meaningful way to explore a phenomenon through valid data and conclusions presenting practical recommendations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In contrast, researchers use quantitative methods to test hypotheses and theories, and to develop generalizations through a series of closed-ended questions (Green et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). Researchers may use the mixed-method approach to combine qualitative and quantitative research approaches for use in a single study (Yin, 2018). However, neither the quantitative nor the mixed methodologies were appropriate for this study because I did not develop or test hypotheses, nor did I use closed-ended questions.

For this study, I considered ethnography, phenomenology, and case study qualitative research designs. In an ethnographic design, the researcher focuses on the characteristics in a cultural setting to identify cultural aspects (Wolcott, 2010). Ethnography is not appropriate for this study, as I did not observe cultural patterns and meanings in a cultural or social group. Researchers use a phenomenological design to understand the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). A phenomenological approach was not appropriate for this study as the goal was to identify and understand strategies employed by upscale full-service restaurant managers to retain customers and not to explore the participants' lived experiences. In a multiple case study design, researchers use the exploration of multiple case units of study to understand a phenomenon (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017). In a multiple case study, a researcher explores phenomena to understand a problem through several units of study (Yin, 2018). Researchers may select a single case study design when exploring a unique set of circumstances or a multiple case study design for observing multiple variants in similar phenomena (Yin, 2018). A multiple case study design was appropriate for this study to explore how three upscale full-service restaurant managers have successfully used strategies to increase customer loyalty strategies to improve brand equity.

Research Question

What customer retention strategies do upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity?

Interview Questions

1. Based upon your organizations' experience, how do your customer retention strategies improve your restaurant's brand equity?
2. What customer retention strategies have you used to increase the number of times customers visit the restaurant, which improved brand equity?
3. What, if any, customer retention strategies have you implemented that have increased customers frequenting the restaurant during different hours of operation?
4. What were the key barriers to implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
5. How did you address the key barriers that impeded your organization implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
6. Based upon your organization's experience, how have the employees at your restaurant contributed to customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
7. How, if at all, did branding strategies contribute to increased customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
8. Based upon your organization's experience, how did your organization measure the effectiveness of the customer retention strategies that you implemented to improve brand equity?
9. How did customer retention contribute to improved brand equity?

10. What additional information can you provide regarding your restaurant's success in developing and implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework selected for this qualitative study was brand equity theory. Brand equity is the consumers' perspectives of a product or service based on the brand name it is associated with (Keller, 1993). In 1993, Keller introduced the brand equity model, also known as the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) pyramid. Encompassed in the brand equity model are brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991). The four fundamental components of the CBBE model are (a) identification of the brand, (b) meaning of the brand, (c) customer response to the brand, and (d) customers' relationships or bonds with the brand (Keller, 2001a). Brand identification relates to aspects of brand awareness that link customers' understanding of competing products and services to specific brand names (Keller, 2001b). Highly salient brands encompass both depth and breadth of brand awareness. Firm managers must establish a distinguishable image with unique characteristics to formulate the meaning of a brand in customers' minds (Keller, 2001a). Once firm managers establish this image, they must monitor consumer responses to the brand to determine their customers' judgments and feelings (Keller, 2001a). Brand responses stem from the head or the heart, and firm managers must determine if the response was from brand judgment or brand feelings (Keller, 2001b). Brand relationship resonates with how the customer identifies with the overall brand (Keller, 2001a).

Full-service restaurant managers who are knowledgeable in brand equity theory can develop and deploy strategies to ensure a strong impression of their brand implants in consumers' memories through favorable experiences (Kim & Kim, 2004). In addition, restaurant owners may use knowledge of branding to increase customer loyalty. As applied to this study, the brand equity theory was the appropriate lens through which to study and explore the alignment of the fundamental components advanced by the theory to the actual strategies the restaurant managers developed and used to increase customer loyalty and repeat business.

Operational Definitions

Brand equity: Brand equity is the consumers' perspectives of a product or service based on the brand name associated with the product or service (Keller, 1993).

Competitive advantage: Competitive advantage concerns a firm's ability to outperform competitors by retaining customers and generating higher revenues (Gek & Yap, 2019).

Customer experience: Customer experience is the degree of satisfaction expressed by a customer based on their interaction with a company's products or services (Benzarti & Mili, 2018).

Customer loyalty: Customer loyalty relates to a person's intention or preference to repeat business with the same establishment (Jiang, Pee, & Klein, 2019).

Customer relationship management (CRM): Customer relationship management is a cross-functional process between individuals, company practices, and technology that unites business operations within an organization (Al-Fedaghi & Al-Otaibi, 2019).

Customer satisfaction: Customer satisfaction is the overall fulfillment of customers' expectations regarding purchased goods or services (Switala, Cichosz, & Trzesiok, 2019).

Table service restaurant: Table service restaurant refers to a service that takes place in fine dining, casual dining, and family dining restaurants where customers' meals are ordered and delivered to their tables (Espinosa et al., 2018).

Upscale full-service restaurant: Upscale full-service restaurant refers to a unique dining experience with a highly trained staff that differentiates a restaurant from its competitors in an elaborate environment with sophisticated décor and ambience (Lee, Lee, & Dewald, 2016; Ryu & Jang, 2008).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs or refutable facts assumed to be valid about a research study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). There are multiple assumptions included in this study. The first assumption was that table service managers wanted to increase marketing strategies to increase customer loyalty. The second assumption was that restaurant managers had an expert level of knowledge of brand equity and the concept of customer loyalty. The third assumption was that all participants would provide accurate and honest responses without bias from themselves or the interviewer that would hinder responses or the interpretation of data.

Limitations

Limitations are negative characteristics that extend beyond the control of the researcher that may alter the findings and generalizability of a study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016; O'Leary, 2018). I identified several limitations in this study: (a) I was a novice researcher, which may limit the research and analysis of this study; (b) in qualitative research, there is no rule to sample size (Yin, 2016); (c) the target population for this multiple case study consisted of a population that met the study criteria in three upscale restaurants; and (d) the geographic location of this study was in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States, which may limit the transferability of these results to other restaurants across the United States.

Delimitations

Delimitations confine the scope of the study with boundaries (O'Leary, 2018). The first delimitation was that in this multiple case study, I only studied three table service restaurants. The second delimitation was the scope of the research did not transcend multiple geographic locations. I did not research restaurants outside the three upscale full-service restaurants that were the units of study. The third delimitation was leadership might have had minimal authority in the workplace to implement preventive or corrective resources to enhance marketing strategies to improve brand equity.

Significance of the Study

People establish restaurants to generate profits and to serve patrons. Gao, Tang, Wang, and Yin (2018) concluded that managers must demonstrate tenacity to maintain relevance in a highly competitive environment where adjustments to marketing strategies are vital to enhancing and maintaining profitability. Upscale full-service restaurant managers may find value in the results of this study to improve operations and increase customer loyalty. Understanding how to improve brand awareness, recognition, recall, and image may contribute to improving customer loyalty and brand equity. The results of this multiple case study could potentially be significant for upscale full-service restaurant managers interested in learning or adapting strategies to improve customer loyalty and improve brand equity, which may affect positive social change for the managers, employees, and communities.

Contribution to Business Practice

The results of this qualitative multiple case study may contribute to business practice by providing examples of proven strategies that have improved brand equity in the upscale full-service industry. Measuring customer satisfaction is critical to the decisions that administrators make to increase customer loyalty (Yang, Yang, Chang, & Chien, 2017). Cai and Chi (2018) found that surpassing customer expectations in the dining industry is a prominent responsibility that restaurateurs must meet due to intense competition. Moreover, Majid, Alias, Samsudin, and Chik (2016) noted that achieving CBBE requires increasing attention in areas like brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand association. Successfully implementing the findings and recommendations of this study could contribute to effective business practice through identifying, adapting, and implementing strategies that have the potential to improve customer satisfaction and increase revenue and employee job security. This qualitative multiple case study may reveal customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers can adapt or use to improve policies and procedures, leading to improved brand equity and profitability.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by improving the self-worth, self-dignity, and professional development of upscale full-service restaurant managers and employees, as well as catalyzing improved service and consistent or increased tax revenues. In addition to providing economic growth, stable employment opportunities extend beyond compensation to potentially enhance physical and mental health among individuals in local communities (Dillon, 2016).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this literature review, I provide an exhaustive synthesis and critical analysis of literature related to upscale full-service restaurants and brand equity with depth and breadth relevant to the conceptual framework and research question in this study. O'Leary (2018) contended that researchers use literature reviews to critically analyze a body of knowledge. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. The foundation of this literature review is the brand equity theory, which is the conceptual framework used to guide the exploration of customer retention strategies and the impact of those strategies on brand equity in upscale full-service restaurants. The goal of this literature review is to summarize, compare, and contrast various sources that relate to the customer retention strategies full-service upscale restaurant managers can use to increase brand equity.

The literature review for this study consisted mainly of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles. The additional references included government sources, seminal works, and other published studies. I used the Walden University Library, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Business Source Complete, and Science Direct to locate articles. My key search terms were *brand equity, CBBE*, *customer loyalty, brand experience, marketing, consumer perception, customer satisfaction, customer retention, consumer behavior, relationship marketing, customer relationship management,* and *restaurant.* I organized the content from the articles together based on either the brand equity theory, CBBE, or customer retention practices.

Brand Equity Theory

The aim of any business owner is to develop brand equity. Farquhar (1989) defined brand equity as the value added to a product based on its affiliation with a brand, along with the efforts taken by a firm's marketing department to build the value. Although industry strategies may vary, there are specific tenets of brand equity that apply to any industry. Regarding brand equity theory, Stahl, Heitmann, Lehmann, and Neslin (2012) identified knowledge, relevance, esteem, and differentiation as the four pillars of value that connect customers to the quality, reliability, and uniqueness of a brand. These pillars combine to form the brand equity model (Figure 1), which consists of four multidimensional brand assets and liabilities: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991). However, business owners can label the elements of the brand equity model as either valuable or not valuable to the business

(Aaker, 1991). As such, business owners should determine how to address each pillar of the brand equity model in their marketing plan.

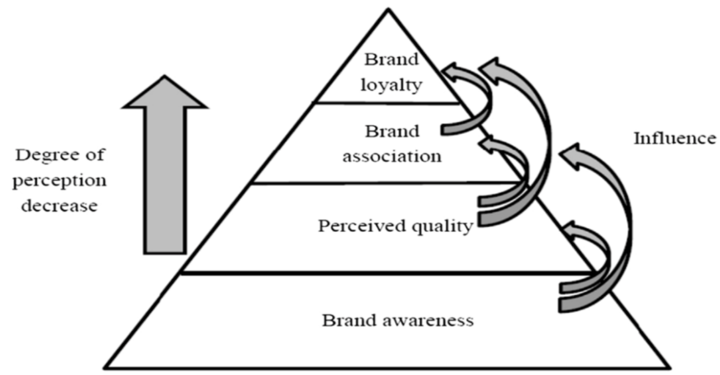

Figure 1. Brand equity model. Adapted from *Building Brand Equity Through Industrial Tourism*, by Chow, Ling, Yen, & Hwang, 2017, p. 73. Copyright 2016 by College of Management, National Cheng Kung University.

Regardless of the value a business owner places on each pillar of the brand equity model, their marketing strategy will likely begin with increasing brand awareness. Brand awareness is the initial stage of the brand equity model in which consumers are unaware of the brand or its name (Chow et al., 2017). At this stage, upscale full-service restaurant managers want to create an awareness of their brand through positive customer experiences associated with quality products or services. Once managers establish brand awareness, their efforts move into the realm of the customers' perceived quality of the brand. During the perceived quality component of brand equity, business owners focus on the customers' perceptions of the brand (Chow et al., 2017). For example, in many industries, perceived quality is a prominent determinant of the customers' level of satisfaction (Iglesias & Guillen, 2004). As it relates to this study, a positive perception of a restaurant's quality may promote repeat business.

Increasing repeat business then leads to the next tier in the brand equity model, which relates to brand associations. According to Chow et al. (2017), brand associations are consumers' assumptions about brand offerings, overall evaluations of the brand, and features recognized as beneficial to the brand. Consumers who recognize certain features as beneficial are more likely to consider repeat business. For example, with McDonald's restaurants, the golden arches and Ronald McDonald provide consumers with a symbol they can then link to their memories of the brand (Aaker, 1991). Once the business owner achieves brand association, they can begin developing brand loyalty, which is the top tier of the brand equity model. Foroudi, Jin, Gupta, Foroudi, and Kitchen (2018) described brand loyalty as the level of attachment a consumer has with a brand. Chow et al. (2017) asserted that brand loyalty is the most vital element of the brand equity model; retaining satisfied customers is less expensive than attracting new customers. Furthermore, business owners who achieve brand loyalty ensure repeat customers, which may also lead to bringing in new customers.

Building, sustaining, and maintaining a brand is a key business asset in the 20th century. As such, business decision makers need to find unique strategies that relate to their identified target markets to maximize efforts to connect the dynamics of brand equity in the consumers' minds. The four tiers of the brand equity pyramid confirm that as the degree of brand perception decreases in the consumer's mind, the level of influence increases, moving individuals from mere brand awareness toward becoming brand loyalists (Chow et al., 2017). Therefore, business owners should try to ensure they are using strategies that will increase consumer perception of the brand rather than the product or service offered.

Although marketing is a component of brand equity, consumers are an additional component business owners should consider. Keller (1993, 2003) and Aaker (1991, 1992, 1996) investigated, tested, and adapted the components of the brand equity theory to include brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty. While these components of brand equity are essential, researchers must consider the consumer perspective rather than only evaluating effective marketing strategies through the lens of the brand equity model (Datta, Ailawadi, & van Heerde, 2017; Datta, Foubert, & Van Heerde, 2015). For instance, regardless of the strength of a business's brand equity, if consumer perceptions are negative, it is unlikely that any amount of brand awareness or association will develop brand loyalty. Chow et al. (2017) noted the importance of consumers' perspectives to businesses operating in the food industry as essential for increasing loyalty and trust amongst consumers while minimizing competition from rivals. Ryu, Lee, and Kim (2012) highlighted the importance of building brand equity in upscale dining experiences through exceptional food, ambience, and superior service to exceed customer satisfaction needs. Furthermore, brand equity results from a brand's likelihood of fulfilling customer expectations (Kang & Namkung, 2018). A business that fails to fulfill customer expectations will also fail to create brand loyalty; therefore, managers should dedicate a considerable amount of effort to building positive consumer perceptions regarding their brands.

A key construct of brand equity theory is the importance of increasing brand recognition as well as positive perceptions. According to Aaker (1991), brand equity is the value placed on a product or service based on the customers' and the company's association with the brand. Therefore, business decision-makers should consider multiple perspectives when developing marketing strategies. Furthermore, a brand is valuable to the investor, manufacturer, and retailer only if the brand has value to the consumer, making it imperative for marketing managers to understand how brand value (a) is instilled in the minds of consumers and (b) affects selection behaviors (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1996). For the consumer, the brand acts as an identification mechanism, represents symbolisms and associations, and reminds consumers of previous experiences. Marketing managers can use a firm's brand to develop unique associations, competitive advantage, and legal protection for the firm's products (Aaker, 1992; Keller, 2003). Sasmita and Suki (2015) argued that the brand is the most valuable asset of any organization. Furthermore, a brand provides managers of the organization with avenues to create value, communicate with consumers, and obtain additional growth opportunities (Franzak, Makarem, & Jae, 2014). As such, marketing strategies must function to develop brand equity in conjunction with positive consumer perception of the brand.

Developing brand equity includes tangible components consumers and competitors clearly identify as part of a brand. For example, brands, which can enhance the value of products beyond their functionality, are often identified by their trademarks (Farquhar, 1989). This example aligned with Yoganathan, Jebarajakirthy, and Thaichon (2015), who described a brand as a combination of physical and intangible characteristics. The design, feature, and packaging of a product are all-inclusive of physical characteristics, while brand name, reputation, and quality perception are examples of intangible characteristics (Yoganathan et al., 2015). Furthermore, Choi, Choi, Lee, and Lee (2017) identified brand equity as the intangible assets by which the industry measures a brand's market value. The intangible nature of brand value, however, makes it challenging for marketing professionals to gauge definitively (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1996). Alternatively, Datta, Ailawadi, and van Heerde (2017) postulated that managers could gauge brand equity by sales, which shows the actual value that a brand adds to a product in terms of consumer perception. As such, business managers should determine how they will measure their brand equity and accordingly develop strategies for continuing increases in their brand equity.

All businesses aim to achieve high brand equity. Aaker (1991) theorized that high brand equity is the result of high business performance and effective marketing strategies. Sornsaruht and Sawmong (2018) asserted that in the restaurant industry, brand equity has a significant impact on diners' decision-making process. Furthermore, brand equity is a competitive strategy implemented to differentiate businesses and organizations to meet performance goals (Majid, Zahra, & Azade, 2016). Brand equity is useful to company leaders to attract capital, generate value streams, and facilitate relationships with interested customers (Arvidsson, 2006). As the goal of a restaurant owner is to maintain business and job security, developing brand equity will assist in this endeavor. According to Majid, Alisa, Samsudin, and Chik (2016), brand equity is a vital element in the restaurant industry and is significant to a company's prosperity. In the early 2000s, managers began emphasizing the importance of defining and understanding the enhancements the brand itself brings to the product (Arvidsson, 2006). This view of brand equity, therefore, provides additional potential marketing strategies for gaining brand loyalty.

Based on brand equity, products are items that offer functional benefits, such as a pair of shoes, toothpaste, or a vehicle. The brand is simply the symbol, design, or trademark that adds value to the product beyond its functional purpose (Farquhar, 1989). Organizations also create brands to provide consumers benefits that are functional, emotional, and self-expressive (Aaker, 2012). Kim and Kim (2004) suggested that strong brands help customers visually correlate intangible products and services. It is important to increase brand equity to ensure consumers engage in compelling brand experiences. Cobb-Walgren et al. (1996) suggested that investors, retailers, and manufacturers should understand how brand equity in the consumers' mind can translate brand value into selection behavior.

Brand awareness. A key component of the brand equity pyramid is brand awareness. Brand awareness is usually at the base of the brand equity pyramid because it is the first step in building brand equity (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) referred to brand awareness as a buyer's potential ability to correlate specific brands with a product category. The conclusion of Romaniuk, Wright, and Faulkner (2017) aligned with this as they indicated that a customer's brand awareness is their capacity to recognize or recall a given brand's connection to a category of products. Additional researchers described brand awareness as the customers' capacity to recognize or recall given brands through the unique images and qualities associated with a brand (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2015; Romaniuk et al., 2017; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). For example, the golden arches that represent McDonald's or the reference in some regions to "Coke" as a representation of soda. Hsu, Oh, and Assaf (2012) asserted that brand awareness is the gateway to consumer commitment to a brand and consistently shows high relation to brand loyalty. Moreover, brand awareness is an important indicator that starts with customers having no awareness of the brand to consumers committing the brand to memory through consistent exposure. The definitions above suggest brand awareness, at its core, is the level of brand knowledge that a consumer possesses and actively uses when making purchasing decisions.

Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010) highlighted the importance of developing consumers' brand awareness prior to any connections with brand association, which in turn enhances the recall of associations in consumers' memories. The amount of knowledge consumers possess about a brand can increase the emotional connection the consumer has with the brand. Affective commitment in branding and customer loyalty is often the result of exceptional customer experiences in which successful businesses typically outperform the competition. Additionally, brand awareness enhances consumers' loyalty to an organization's product and service offerings (Dhurup, Dumasi, & Mafini, 2014). Marketing managers can use the customer lifetime value (CLV) metric to understand consumer purchase behavior and make decisions regarding marketing and sales designed to elicit brand loyalty (Sunder, Kumar, & Zhao, 2016). Emotionally inclined relationships between a consumer and a brand can enhance brand awareness and increase profitability (Webb & Roberts, 2016). Ultimately, brand awareness plays a major role in a consumer's decision-making process.

Yet the power of brand awareness is not limited to the consumers themselves. Brand awareness also creates positive opportunities for existing consumers to potentially sway new consumers based on their shared experiences through word of mouth (WOM); (Barreda et al., 2015). Consumers that have a positive attitude toward a brand are more likely to talk about it and spread brand awareness. The extent to which a brand is known or familiar to the public may potentially render more associations that can strengthen the brand's name, thereby increasing the number of consumers who try the product.

Perceived quality. Perceived quality is the second component in the brand equity pyramid. Lewis and Chambers (1989) described perceived quality as the difference between the consumer's judgment based on product or service comparisons versus their actual perception of the product used, or the service performed based on their expectations. Therefore, the perception a consumer has regarding the quality of the product will influence their decisions regarding the product. Snoj, Korda, and Mumel (2004) provided a synthesis of definitions from varying authors that described customer perceived quality as (a) a multidimensional concept, (b) individual expertise and experience from previous product purchases, (c) beneficial based on supplier offerings, and (d) the consumer's natural perception. Additionally, Malik (2012) noted that a consumer's perception of the quality they received directly relates to their satisfaction with the product or service. Similarly, Vera (2015) referred to a consumer's perceived brand quality as the subjective perception a product's superiority has over alternative product offerings. To periodically analyze these perceptions, managers should consider using SERVQUAL, a reliable analyzation tool used to gauge a company's service quality against customers' expectations (Dincer, Yuksel, & Martinez, 2019). Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) introduced the SERVQUAL framework with five specific elements, which include (a) tangible brick-and-motor facilities and personnel, (b) reliability to ensure proper analyzation of advertised service, (c) empathy for customer needs, (d) assurance of customers' confidence, and (e) responsiveness to the customers' needs. Implementing a benchmark service performance tool may assist marketing leaders to increase potential consumers' having positive experiences with all products associated with a brand.

Multiple components comprise the perceived quality of a product. Researchers posited that the typical formulation of consumer behavioral intentions arises from perceptions, expectations, and service experiences that support the consumers' attitudes and perceptions of brand quality toward preferred shopping destinations (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Furthermore, Aaker (1991) noted a few distinct reasons consumers purchase products or services based on perceived quality, which includes (a) the perception of quality the brand, (b) price, (c) wide availability, and (d) differentiation from competitor's offerings. As such, business managers must provide the right amount of quality at an appealing price point to ensure that consumers see investment value (Baxter, 2018). Given the various components involved in how consumers determine their perception of quality, marketing leaders should seek to address a wide variety of factors.

Organization leaders can set service quality standards, but consumers ultimately determine their perception of the quality supplied. Zopiatis, Theocharous, Constanti, and Tjiapouras (2017) highlighted that employee knowledge and professionalism are directly associated with service quality, which directly influences customer perception. Bunker (2014) and Hwang and Han (2015) revealed that the more connected consumers feel to an organization, the higher their level of quality perception and commitment will be. As such, it is important that organizations strive to develop relationships with their consumers. As the consumers' perception of brand quality is a direct reflection of their loyalty and commitment to the brand's personality (Yang & Lee, 2019), the overall superiority of products or services is ultimately gauged by what the consumers perceive as quality (Hang et al., 2018). The CLV metric is critical to long-term success, especially in the restaurant industry, as it provides stable long-term and futuristic consumer purchasing behavior results (Sunder et al., 2016). Understanding the CLV model is the difference between a business having consumers with predictable shopping patterns that are likely to return regularly, versus consumers that may only patronize the business once. As such, upscale full-service restaurant managers should consider perceived quality as a potential strategy to retain customers and improve brand equity.

Brand association. Brand association is the third component of the brand equity model. Aaker (1991) defined brand association as anything linked to the consumer's memory of a brand. Sasmita and Suki (2015) added that these stored memories differentiate brands for the consumer. Brand association is the potential value a brand's name and image have to the consumer (Chow, Ling, Yen, & Hwang, 2017). Therefore, a brand's strength is a result of the quality and quantity of brand associations in the consumer's mind (Burmann, Jost-Benz, & Riley, 2009). Brand association relates to the present study because patrons often frequent luxury restaurants for the social status or wealthy image it portrays (Hwang & Hyun, 2012). A positive brand association can create a positive brand image leading to a competitive advantage in the market, which improves a company's status among competitors (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). As such, brand association provides substantial value to brand managers.

Marketing managers strive to create brand associations in the minds of their customers through advertising channels such as television and radio advertisements. Some managers position their brands as socially beneficial to improve the image and awareness of the brand by affiliating their brands with causes that stand for something socially positive (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007). For example, developing commercials and advertisements that include people of all races and types of relationships. However, Chow et al. (2017) pointed out high brand awareness does not always equate to a high-quality perception by consumers. In the luxury restaurant industry, prestige is a critical element, which managers need to understand to maximize business with patrons (Hwang & Hyun, 2012). When managers focus on enhanced brand awareness and create a positive brand image, they are more likely to provide consumers with a promising, unique brand association (Bick, 2009). Therefore, the development of a positive brand image is one strategy full-service upscale restaurant managers can use to increase customer retention and improve brand equity.

Brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is the top tier of the brand equity pyramid. Aaker (1991) described brand loyalty as the consumer's level of dedication to purchasing the same brand regularly despite competitors' offerings. Girard, Trapp, Pinar, Gulsoy, and Boyt (2017) posited that brand loyalty is a consumer's attachment to a specific store or brand. One example of this may be choosing to grocery shop at a single location despite the prevalence of other grocery stores in the area or relying on a brand when choosing to attend specific restaurants while traveling. Yoganathan et al. (2015) claimed that brand loyalty is a consumer's positive attitude toward a brand, which encourages repetitive buying behaviors. Additionally, consumers often base purchase decisions on their emotions or feelings. Sasmita and Suki (2015) suggested that loyal consumers demonstrate emotional bias against competitors' brands. As a result, consumers demonstrate both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty toward brands (Cheng, 2011). Therefore, restaurant managers should consider the influence of emotion and attitude when developing strategies to increase customer retention and brand equity.

Attitudinal and behavioral dimensions often intertwine in the element of brand loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty stems from an individual's attitude regarding the attributes that a brand possesses, which, in turn, dictates one's emotional loyalty (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007). As such, attitudinal brand loyalty manifests itself when a customer identifies with the unique product or service characteristics of a brand (Aaker, 1991). Attitudinal loyalists have favorable opinions about brands and feel psychologically connected to brands, yet their loyalty does not result in loyalty behaviors (Ngobo, 2017). Attitudinal loyalists often commit to brands but may purchase the brand infrequently.

This uncommitted behavior does not signify dissatisfaction; rather, it indicates a lack of justification for the expenditure at certain intervals (Wolter, Bock, Smith, & Cronin, 2017). When a consumer’s loyalty expands beyond the attitudinal realm, they make purchases out of habit or convenience. Yim and Kannan (1999) suggested that the degree of behavioral loyalty to a brand ranges from that of the hard-core loyalist, who intentionally purchases the same brand of a product repeatedly, to the reinforcing loyalist, who alternates between a few specific brands. Customers are more likely to remain with brands with which they are familiar because the likelihood of the product or service rendering a favorable outcome is often unpredictable (Stahl et al., 2012).

Business leaders can use the total quality management approach in conjunction with Six Sigma to help increase brand predictability. Using total quality management, organizations ensure they manage the quality of the product at the organizational level, with the consumer as the focus (Bazrkar, Iranzadeh, & Farahmand, 2017). Organizations may also implement the Six Sigma approach using statistical tools and organizational goals to improve their business process to ensure the quality of a product (Wang, Yeh, & Chu, 2016). Organizations with a total quality management foundation may also choose to incorporate the Six Sigma approach to ensure the stability and quality of products, thereby ensuring predictability (Sabet, Adams, & Yazdani, 2016). The brand's predictability then enhances positive outcomes and profit margins for business managers (Stahl et al., 2012). Additionally, Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000) asserted that loyal consumers are not likely to switch brands due to their emotional fortitude toward their favorite brands. Aaker (1991) asserted that brand loyalty is the center of the brand equity model and a strategic asset of the organization that produces and markets a brand.

When developing a brand, marketing managers should consider the amount they will be asking consumers to pay for their products. However, customers' attitudes about a product or service offered by the firm often transfer to the firm itself (Girard et al., 2017). For example, a consumer's attitude about a product or service may focus on the exclusiveness, reputation, or fashion sense of a brand in relation to themselves. As such, Reicbbeld (1996) proposed that brand loyal consumers will pay higher costs when compared with other brands to obtain products from their preferred brand-name products, a process referred to as market skimming. Market skimming is a strategy in which businesses introduce products into the market at a higher price point and then subsequently lower the price point over time (Dean, 1976; Marn, Roegner, & Zawada, 2003). Given the importance of pricing in retail businesses as a component of marketing strategy, to ensure brand loyal customers will pay the required price to ensure profit, organizations must establish preferred target markets before embarking on a marketing strategy.

To ensure consumer willingness to pay market prices, organizations should consider fostering positive brand images. Keller (1993) defined brand image as the consumer's association with and perceptions of a brand. In contrast, Grohs and Reisinger (2014) described the characteristics of a brand as a name, symbol, or design that identifies the company's products or services. While Chung, Lee, Lee, and Koo (2015) defined the three dimensions of brand image as (a) *functionality*, an internal benefit connected with basic security needs; (b) *experience*, based on satisfactory product or service use; (c) and *symbolism*, an external benefit associated with social or personal significance. Chung et al.'s definition of brand image is the most comprehensive and combines facets of both Keller and Grohs and Reisinger's definitions. For this study regarding the exploration of customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity, the more comprehensive definition of brand image is the most appropriate.

Marketing managers need to consider multiple factors influencing the brand image associated with their firm and product. Hamilton and Chernev (2013) suggested that retailers often create brand images to correlate with consumers' high- or low-price expectations. For example, the price a consumer would expect to pay for seafood at a chain restaurant versus the price they would expect to pay at an upscale seafood restaurant. Hwang and Hyun (2012) noted in the luxury restaurant industry, customers expect to pay higher prices for high brand prestige. As such, marketing managers in upscale full-service restaurants may rely on the prestige associated with their brand as a method of determining the price of their offerings. Furthermore, brand image correlates with the feelings and thoughts that current and potential customers have about a company or product (Brexendorf, Bayus, & Keller, 2015). Moreover, a brand's image shapes the consumer's memory, knowledge, and overall relationship with a brand (Huang & Ku, 2016). Cho, Fiore, and Russell (2015) suggested that a positive brand image can increase brand loyalty amongst consumers. Marketing managers in the restaurant industry have free reign over their level of creativity when creating or establishing brand loyalty through brand image. Managers may find it beneficial to establish and promote a brand’s image to increase brand loyalty amongst current and potential consumers (Goodrich, Schiller, & Galletta, 2015). Essentially, business owners may create brand loyalty through an established brand image.

Customer-Based Brand Equity

Many industries rely on the consumer to maintain profitability, which makes the marketing function a key component for firm success. Keller (1993) developed the CBBE model to explore the difference between consumers’ favorable recollections of brands and their reactions to the marketing of brands. Like brand equity, there are clear components in CBBE. Keller (2001b) introduced distinct steps that firms should incorporate to build a strong brand using the CBBE model (a) ensure the brand's identity, (b) establish the meaning of the brand, (c) generate consumer responses to the brand, and (d) formulate brand relationships. The steps in the CBBE model are not vastly different from those in the brand equity model; instead, the difference lies in the specific marketing of each step to consumers. Additionally, Keller (1993) added that salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and resonance are the six fundamental building blocks for producing and sustaining a successful brand. These six fundamental elements are embedded and intertwined in the four steps incorporated to make up the CBBE model. When properly gauged, the CBBE model can act as a yardstick that marketers can use to track the progress of the brand’s overall success (Keller, 2001a). For example, ensuring the identity of the brand is based on salience and performance can potentially garner positive associations in the minds of consumers. Thereby encouraging the continued acquisition of brand-related products.

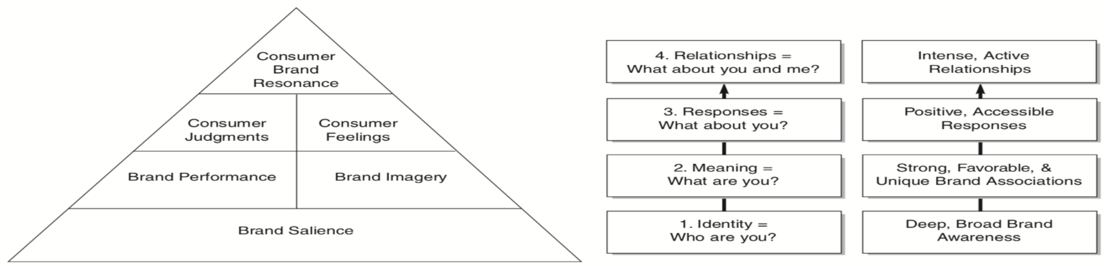

Figure 2. Customer-based brand equity pyramid. From *Building Customer-Based Brand Equity: A Blueprint for Creating Strong Brands*, by K. Keller, 2001b, p.7. Copyright 2001 by Kevin Lane Keller.

The components of the CBBE model are hierarchal, much like the brand equity model. The CBBE pyramid (shown in Figure 2) creates a visual of the tenets encompassed in the brand equity model and is the most effective way to construct, measure, and surmise the model (Keller, 2001b). Using the CBBE model, marketing managers can develop strategic marketing plans to achieve brand loyalty from consumers. Commonly used elements of the CBBE model include brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, and perceived quality or value (Majid, Alias, Samsudin, & Chik, 2016; Tasci, 2018). In regards to the restaurant industry, CBBE hinges on a restaurant's greatest assets: customer service, brand name, and representation (Kim & Kim, 2004). For example, a quick-service restaurant that provides food quickly and efficiently will likely achieve brand loyalty on a larger scale than a purported quick-service restaurant that frequently takes longer to fill customer orders. It is important to measure customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry so that managers have a proper standard to determine what the restaurant is doing right. Clemes, Mohi, Li, and Hu (2018) highlighted SERVQUAL, DINESERV, TANGSERV, and DINESCAPE as optional service quality instruments modified by various researchers that managers can use to gather more accurate data on restaurant service quality from the consumers perspective. These types of service scales hone in on the quality of the physical environment and interactional elements (Hwang & Ok, 2013). When a brand is sustainable, reputable, and recognizable, consumers develop a favorable image, which increases their equity in a brand creating a competitive advantage for the organization (Aaker, 1991; Keller 1993).

Furthermore, Yoganathan et al. (2015) indicated firms that increased brand equity also increased profits and revenues, resulting in increased brand equity. Given the aim of companies to increase profits and revenue to ensure sustainability, the CBBE model is a viable method for attaining brand equity. Researchers supported the viability of this method for attaining brand equity by asserting that companies that desire to build or enhance a successful brand should consider implementing the CBBE business model (Di Benedetto & Kim, 2016). Additionally, business managers use the CBBE model to evaluate the value of a brand from the customers' perspectives to generate behavioral insights that assist in establishing brand management strategies for implementation (Christodoulides & Chernatony, 2004). Positive CBBE recognition occurs through a consumer's reaction to a brand despite the tangible or intangible qualities of the product or service in comparison to a competitor with similar product or service marketing qualities (Keller, 1993). CBBE recognition aligns with the tenets of brand equity theory while providing marketing managers a method for focusing on the consumer. The strength of CBBE rests in the consumer's knowledge, memory, and recollection of the brand (Christodoulides, Cadogan, & Veloutsou, 2015). As such, it is essential that business managers evaluate consumer reactions to their brand through performance tools, such as SERVQUAL, to better measure and manage customer satisfaction.

In 1993, Keller enhanced Aaker's 1991 brand equity theory with the creation of the CBBE model to assist senior- and mid-level managers with their brand-building efforts. Accomplishing superior brand-building involves four distinct stages: (a) ensure the brand's identity, (b) establish the meaning of the brand, (c) generate consumer responses to the brand, and (d) formulate brand relationships (Keller, 2001a). Six distinguishable brand-building blocks differentiate each of these four distinct stages, which include brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgments, brand feelings, and brand resonance. Each building block of the CBBE pyramid needs to function in its respective stage to successfully reach the goals set by company management.

Brand identity. At the bottom level of the CBBE pyramid is brand identity. This stage incorporates brand salience, the building block of the model. Brand salience or awareness is how the brand resonates in the customers' minds during their shopping experiences compared to other brands (Hassan, Rafi, & Kazmi, 2015). Keller (2001b) elaborated on three key functions of brand salience, which include: (a) its responsibility for the overall make-up and strength associated with the brand that inadvertently defines the brand's image, (b) maximizing category identification and satisfactory experiences with each potential product or service purchase opportunity, and (c) the customers lack of purchase motivation or purchase ability. During the brand identity stage, customers are typically inquiring about how the design of a brand's products or services can satisfy their immediate needs, wants, or desires (Keller, 2001a). Based on previous experiences or offerings from competitors, consumers in the upscale full-service restaurant industry determine which brand is the best choice. Managers who want to achieve brand identity must create advertising or experience opportunities in which the brand is easily stimulated and hovers at the top of consumers' minds, as well as developing an advertising feedback loop to measure the effectiveness of their advertising and brand building efforts (Keller, 2001a). Successful advertising and experience opportunities will likely generate additional opportunities to engage the consumer, which could result in positive associations regarding the brand identity, and create repeat business, the key to running a successful business.

Keller (2003), expressed the importance of observing brand awareness from the perspective of depth and breadth. Brand depth refers to the ease in which consumers recall or recognize a brand (Keller, 2001a). Brand breadth is a combination of product variety, the number of products offered, and the strength of the link between the brand and its products (Dawar, 1996). In addition to how often the brand resonates in one's mind, breadth extends to the variety of consumption situations in which a brand comes to the top of one's mind (Keller, 2001a). Brand breadth raises the question, *do consumers think about the same upscale full-service restaurant when they want a juicy steak, happy hour after work, and catering for a party or event*? Once managers establish brand depth with consumers, strategically implementing strategies to enhance brand breadth may be a means to increase overall sales volume.

Brand meaning. The second stage of the CBBE pyramid is brand meaning. This tier incorporates the building blocks of brand performance and brand imagery. Once customers become aware of the brand, their desire to understand what the brand stands for may increase. Brand meaning includes characterizing the brand in the mind of consumers through image and performance (Keller, 2001a). During this phase, consumers might consider whether the brand provides and satisfies the basic functions and needs of the product or service category.

Brand imagery. Brand imagery is not based only on objective components, such as those related to brand logo, but also subjective associations a consumer aligns with the brand. A brand's image is the impression or product identification consumers have that they use to differentiate between products or services offered by various brands (Keller, 1993). Once a consumer forms an image of the brand, it may be difficult to reverse their associations. Im, Kim, Elliot, and Han (2012) noted that brand image is a key element that impacts brand loyalty. In the restaurant industry, brand image affects customers' perceptions, which in-turn impact loyalty, satisfaction, and purchase behaviors (Jin, Lee, & Huffman, 2012). Consumers tend to gravitate to brands that are compatible with their self-image (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2009). For example, in the restaurant industry, consumers may choose to patron restaurants that have a relaxed atmosphere rather than those more formal. Isoraite (2015) stated consumers desire brands with solid reputations that coincide with their preferred personality. Brand personality is the humanistic characteristics a brand personifies (Aaker, 1997). Therefore, maintaining a positive brand image is crucial for restaurant managers to ignite healthy emotions in consumers to build customer loyalty, satisfaction, and repeat business (Lee, Back, & Kim, 2009). Restaurant managers that fail to maintain a positive brand image could fail to secure consumer loyalty.

In addition to brand image, businesses should strive to ensure they project a corporate image that aligns with their brand. Corporate image also impacts the perception of a brand's image over time (Vahabzadeh et al., 2017). The brand is more than a logo; it is a unique set of values that stimulate a consumer's desire to make purchasing decisions (Yi, Zhao, & Joung, 2018). Unique attributes such as the dining atmosphere, food quality, and service quality are all vital to the premium value consumers place on brand image (Espinosa et al., 2018). Therefore, a company's image influences the consumer's reaction to corporate brands (Mohan, Voss, Jimenez, & Gammoh, 2018). As such, corporations that maintain a positive corporate image may increase the likelihood of achieving consumer loyalty across brands.

Brand performance. Businesses should try to ensure consumers experience positive brand performance to elicit a positive brand image. Brand performance correlates with consumers' level of satisfaction with the product or service meeting their functional needs (Keller, 2001a). In other words, *were the consumers' expectations met or exceeded?* A business's achievement of brand performance is reliant upon the product or service offered. The product is the sole source for consumers' experiences, firms' communications, and positive and negative feedback generated by others about the brand (Keller, 2001a). A customer's positive perception of a restaurant's brand equates to an overall total quality restaurant to the consumer (Yi et al., 2018). For example, Chang and

Ko (2017) noted luxury customers place more trust in organizations when their confidants are associated members. Positive perceptions indicate that brand performance does not have to be related to personal consumer experiences, but may also be the result of experiences among peers.

Brand performance relates to this study as the focus is on determining how upscale full-service restaurant managers can improve brand equity. Upscale or luxury fine-dining restaurants offer clients a sophisticated interior ambience with a rich variety of quality food (Bhuyan, 2011). Given the higher price point of upscale dining, restaurants in this category should consider the benefits of positive dining experiences. In relation to sales growth in the dining restaurant industry, Espinosa et al. (2018) identified the influence positive brand image and customer loyalty have on customer retention. Yi et al. (2018) recommended that managers who find their restaurants are not industry leaders should develop unique and attractive branding strategies that differentiate them from their competitors. One method for doing so is ensuring consumers have positive experiences with brand performance. Once consumers positively differentiate a restaurant from its competitors via obtaining a positive brand image, the manager is then in a place to maintain consumer loyalty rather than seeking to attain it.

Brand response. The third tier of the CBBE pyramid is brand response. This tier encompasses the building blocks of brand feelings and brand judgments. During this phase, the way a product or service affects the consumer's feelings or judgments is heavily considered. Once consumers have a better understanding of what a brand stands for, they can move into a realm where judgments and feelings determine their response to the brand. Brand response is the feelings or judgments the consumer develops after they have purchased the brand (Pick & Eisend, 2016). Brand judgments stem from consumers' opinions or evaluations generated from what they imagined a brand's quality or credibility would or should have been (Panda & Kapoor, 2016). Brand feelings stem from emotional reactions to the brand, such as excitement or approval (Panda & Kapoor, 2016). These actions take place in either the customer's head or heart, and the goal is to impart positive responses when the brand enters the consumer's mind (Keller, 2001a). The use of instruments, such as SERVQUAL, can serve as tools for measuring consumer beliefs regarding the quality of a brand. Based on the findings from such instruments, businesses can address issues to maintain consumer loyalty and retention, thereby eliciting positive brand judgments.

The goal of some branding efforts is to elicit positive responses from consumers. Branding that stimulates a positive consumer response toward a brand drives an increase in company profits (Keller, 1993). Developing a level of trust in relationships stems from emotions and feelings of gratitude from doing business with companies (Mishra, 2016). These feelings of gratitude can create loyal behavior. Customers that exemplify behavior loyalist characteristics have an increased degree of willingness to repeatedly purchase preferred products or services associated with a specific brand (Peng & Li, 2019). Attaining consumer loyalty could lead to increases in revenue streams.

Brand relationship. Brand relationship is at the pinnacle of the CBBE pyramid. This tier encompasses the building block of brand resonance. During this phase, consumers’ loyalty, attachment, community, and engagement with a product or service are paramount (Keller, 2001a). At this stage, the consumer's preference, connection, and interest in the product or service offered are useful to gauge their relationship with the brand. At this level, it is imperative to keep in mind the reality of consumer relationships with brands they purchase and consume and the likelihood that not all brands are equivalent from a consumer perspective.

Brand resonance refers to the sense of loyalty a consumer feels toward a brand. Keller (2001b) credits brand resonance as the most valuable of the building blocks. Additionally, Keller defined brand resonance as the level of intense loyalty customers have with the brand. Badrinarayanan, Suh, and Kim (2016) described brand resonance as active behavior or intense psychological relationships that a customer develops with a brand. Once the customer reaches this top tier, the organization typically benefits from customer loyalty, positive sharing of experiences about the business, and efficient and effective marketing programs (Keller 2001a). Al-Kwifi and McNaughton (2013) suggested that without established brand resonance, a consumer is just as likely to shift their loyalty to another brand as to attach it to the current brand. Brand resonance is, therefore, a key component to attaining brand loyalty.

In contrast to brand resonance is brand relationship building, which encompasses a consumer's feelings toward a brand. Blackston (1992) identified brand relationship as the attitudinal interaction between the consumer and the brand. Fournier (1998) correlated relationships with brands as purposeful connections that shape personalities through self-worth and self-esteem. Chen, Nelson, and Hsu (2015) argued that brand personality has humanlike characteristics associated with a brand. A manager's ability to personify an organization's brand increases the resonance of the brand with consumer wants and needs, which potentially influences behaviors (Peng & Li, 2019). Wiid, Cant, and Roux (2016) suggested business leaders build and maintain long-term relationships with customers to increase customer loyalty. Therefore, it appears that a subsequent result of long-term relationships would be improving brand equity.

A review of the extant literature resulted in a wealth of information regarding strategies for increasing brand relationships. The connection between customers and brands has gained significant attention in academia and practice (Peng & Li, 2019). Long-term relationships develop between consumers and businesses when brand personality extends to human personality (Rajagopal, 2010). A strong predictor of brand equity is a consumer's attachment to the brand and development of affective commitment (Seric, Mikulic, & Gil-Saura, 2016; Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, & Singh, 2017). Peng and Li (2019) described brand relationship as the diverse level of perception and influence a relationship can have on brand trust, love, and loyalty. When successfully implemented, the relationship harbors trust and satisfaction (Blackston, 1992). A relationship with trust and satisfaction could potentially elicit brand loyalty, generating CLV, which is likely to increase revenue and brand equity.

Marketing managers often place their focus on creating brand relationships. Fournier (1998) argued that there was a paradigm shift in marketing relationships that shifted the focus to mutually reciprocated long-term relationships between customers and firms. Businesses measure reciprocity through the conscious decision of a customer to develop mutually beneficial relationships with a firm (Morales, 2005). The increase or decrease in customer satisfaction is proportional to service performance and customer satisfaction (Switala et al., 2019). Building positive long-term relationships between the consumer, the firm, and the brand can potentially increase revenue. Andrews, Luo, Fang, and Aspara (2014) found implementing cause-marketing relationships enhanced consumer demand and increased sales revenue. As such, increasing brand relationships may be a viable strategy for increasing brand equity in upscale full-service restaurants.

The CBBE model aligns with the purpose of this study to increase strategies upscale full-service restaurant managers may use to improve brand equity. The overall purpose of the CBBE model is to provide marketing managers with comprehensive guidelines and recommendations to build a strong brand with significant equity (Keller, 2001a). When considering the various elements of the CBBE model, managers' efforts may differ considerably based on consumers' responses (Liu, Wong, Tseng, Change, & Phau, 2017). Keller (2001a), ultimately intended for the model to portray (a) logical thinking for industry professionals and academia, (b) relevance and versatility to impact multiple brands and industries, and (c) comprehensiveness to cover depth and breadth to assist managers with strategic direction to make sound brand-related decisions. Therefore, this review of the CBBE model is appropriate for a discussion regarding strategies to increase consumer loyalty.

Alternate Marketing Theories

In addition to the brand equity theory, researchers could consider numerous other marketing theories to establish successful strategies to enhance profitability among competitors in their industry. The relationship marketing (RM) theory provides an understanding of paradigm shifts from transactional to relational in business and marketing (Jones, Ranaweera, Murray, & Bansal, 2018). The competitive advantage (CA) theory is satisfied when the consumer's value for a company's goods or services exceeds the actual cost associated with the cost of production (Gek & Yap, 2019). The resource-advantage (RA) theory involves marketplace power struggles amongst competitors for competitive advantage with resources (Hunt, 1995b). Despite alternative theories, it is evident that long-term relationship building between firms and their customers remains essential.

Relationship marketing theory. Berry (2008) introduced the RM theory in 1983. The theory further emerged in the early 1990s by various scholars who advanced the concept by encompassing relationship building and the market analysis of competitors and consumers (Khan, 2014a). Gummesson (2002) defined RM as long-term relationships established with customers and stakeholders by organizations. Berry (2008) identified five RM strategies: (a) core service marketing, (b) relationship customization, (c) service augmentation, (d) relationship pricing, and (e) internal marketing. Agariya and Singh (2011) proposed six primary tenets of RM to include: (a) trust, (b) satisfaction, (c) loyalty, (d) commitment, (e) quality, and (f) communication. Since the early '90s, organizations have shaped the way they develop company mission statements to support their overall strategy to remain profitable based on the RM approach (Berry, 2008). Pick and Eisend (2016) emphasized how crucial RM is to the business owner's overall profitability.

Berry's (2008) seminal work *Relationship Marketing* expounded on the five RM strategies. Core services focus on establishing customer relationships and central market needs. Relationship customization tailors service needs to fit individual consumers for retention purposes. Service augmentation provides the consumer with a value-added as an extra incentive not offered by potential competitors. The relationship pricing strategy encourages relationships with price incentives that offer the customer more through incentives or frequent user benefits. Lastly, internal marketing refers to the employees' understanding of customer satisfaction and repeat purchase power. Agariya and Singh (2011) provided a plethora of definitions that elaborate on their six primary tenets of RM in their seminal work, *What Really Defines Relationship Marketing? A Review of Definitions and General and Sector-Specific Defining Constructs.*

Building and maintaining customer relationships is essential in marketing. The RM theory entails attracting, maintaining, and strengthening relationships with customers or other stakeholders of the organization (Berry, 2008). Companies create RM strategies to increase customer retention values (Ashley, Noble, Donthu, & Lemon, 2011). This theory extends beyond the product to focus on a service emphasis that develops relationships with new customers while maximizing relationships with current customers. RM alters the attention of marketing away from the product to hone in on customer relationships (Wang, 2012). When issues relating to business strategies arise, prior relationship status with customers and competitors stands in the forefront (Whittler & Farris, 2017). Understanding and managing customer relationships are essential to the marketing of a business (Zhang, Watson, Palmatier, & Dant, 2016). Armstrong and

Kotler (2015) contended that RM is pivotal in the marketing process to retain existing customers and attract new customers. Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggested only using RM when it complements the firm's strategy to reach a sustainable competitive advantage.

CRM is a direct extension of RM that focuses on developing and maintaining continuous and profitable relationships with customers using CRM software and other software platforms specifically designed to improve the customer's experience with the organization (Ata & Toker, 2012). Josiassen, Assaf, and Cvelbarm (2014) found firms that have successful partnerships with their customers perform better than organizations that do not. CRM is a software platform designed specifically to enhance the customer's experience with the organization to attract new consumers and retain existing customers through RM (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). Managers use CRM to acquire information on new and existing customers (Khodakarami & Chan, 2014). CRM systems facilitate data collection, storing, and analyzing customers' information and preferences to manage proper communication channels and effectively choose strategic marketing decisions (Khodakarami & Chan, 2014). Successful CRM practices allow managers to identify customers' tastes and preferences (Rahimi & Gunlu, 2016). Chang, Park, and Chaiy (2010) suggested that due to the diverse collection of customer data, CRM tools assist companies in developing more efficient marketing strategies to target customers effectively.

The CRM model (depicted in Figure 3) consists of three elements: customers, relationships, and management. The CRM model centers around decision-making that meet the customer's needs by promoting successful business strategies that establish long-term relationships (Tohidi & Jabbari, 2012). Most managers implement CRM strategies to increase consumers' levels of satisfaction and company profits (Tohidi & Jabbari, 2012). The intention of using CRM strategies is to benefit both the firm and the customer by enhancing customer relationships and customer retention (Kumar, 2014; Yoganathan et al., 2015). Customer retention is simply one of the obvious benefits included with CRM. Oztaysi, Sezgin, and Ozak (2011) included increased customer acquisition, more profitable customers, and additional cross-selling opportunities in addition to customer retention. Tohidi and Jabbari (2012) highlighted three important elements of CRM. First, CRM may be beneficial for collecting and organizing the customer's information, but gauging the customer's intention may be difficult for the organization to use to measure profitability and growth due to the nature of competition. Second, relational purchasing patterns between the consumer and the company may not have consistency. Finally, CRM extends beyond the organization's marketing department into management. Processes must be sustainable and lucrative to improve the chances of profitability.

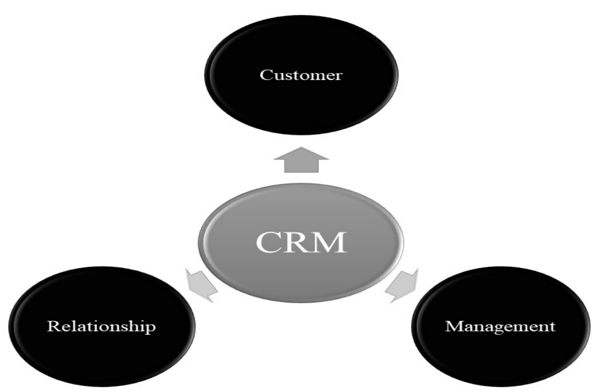

Figure 3. Customer relationship management. From *CRM as a Marketing Attitude Based on Customer's Information*, by Tohidi & Jabbari, 2012, (p.566). CC BY-NC-ND.

Competitive advantage theory. Porter (1979b) introduced the competitive advantage theory to explore the effect of competitive advantage in business. Porter (1979a) identified low cost and differentiation as two primary factors associated with the competitive advantage theory's three generic strategies: cost leadership, differentiation strategy, and focus strategy. The competitive advantage theory is an organization's unique set of competitive abilities to decrease production cost at a value-added cost to consumers (Porter, 1985). Organizations attain a competitive advantage when their profit margin surpasses that of competitors in the industry. In comparison, organizations reach sustained competitive advantage when they maintain their profit margin for consecutive years (Gek & Yap, 2019).

Porter's competitive advantage analysis assists firms with gaining a better understanding of their firm's external position in the environment as it relates to competitors (Evans, 2016). Organizational leaders use marketing strategies to increase growth and to improve competitive positioning in the market (Azim & Azim, 2012). Yenipazarli (2015) concurred, in a competitive marketplace, company decision-makers must create innovative strategies and products that align with consumer desires to remain sustainable in a competitive industry. Randhawa et al. (2016) advanced that managers must differentiate their products or services to obtain a competitive advantage over their competitors. Porter (1985) asserted businesses must optimize their value chain to successfully gain a competitive edge and consistently outperform their industry competitors. Moreover, scholars and practitioners agree that product and service differentiation is a competitive advantage strategy that is gaining recognition and setting businesses apart from the competition (Coelho & Henseler, 2012).

To create competitive strategies, managers employ the competitive advantage theory (Evans, 2016). The competitive advantage theory, also referred to as the competitive advantage strategy, implies an organization's competitive advantage stems from the value the organization creates for consumers that exceeds what buyers are willing to pay (Porter, 2008). Popa, Dobrin, Popescu, and Draghici (2011) highlighted innovation as another source of competitive advantage that enhances the very essence of the organization by improving product or service value. To remain competitive and relevant in an ever-changing market, business leaders should remain flexible with their organization's marketing strategies (Garg, 2012). Davcik and Sharma (2015) noted differentiating company brands through innovation may potentially lessen competitive pricing. One example of competitive advantage lies in a firm's ability to provided similar products or services to consumers at a lower price than competitors (Handoko, Aryanto, & So, 2015). Differentiation also occurs when companies can command higher prices due to the caliber of products or services offered and consumers' willingness to pay high prices to acquire those products (Abdullah, Hamali, & Abdullah, 2015).

Marketing managers are responsible for developing business strategies that achieve competitive advantages to avoid threats such as (a) new market entrants, (b) current competitive rivals in the market, (c) substitute products and services, (d) suppliers bargaining power, and (e) buyers bargaining power (Azadi & Rahimzadeh, 2012; Porter 1980; Porter 1985). Porter (1979a) suggested company leaders should assess these five competitive forces prior to developing business strategies to maximize efforts in the market around competitors' weaknesses. Additionally, differentiation strategies allow managers to implement copywriting, which minimizes competitors' entrance into the market (Azadi & Rahimzadeh, 2012). Establishing a barrier to entry in any market is critical to reduce the level of ease attached to entering the industry (Khalique & Pablos, 2015). If the level of entry into the industry is too easy, it increases the level of attractiveness to competitors.

Creating value for customers is the first step in creating profitable long-term relationships. Porter (1985) suggested firms can dominate their rivals by being cheap (offering more value at lower cost) or differentiation (appearing different to customers). The primary objective of business managers is to satisfy customers, which should lead to creating a competitive business advantage (Saka, Elegunde, & Lawal, 2014).

Resource-advantage theory. Hunt and Morgan (1995a) first introduced RA theory, which Hunt (2000) further discussed. In RA, the value of resources obtain influence a firm's marketing strategy (Magnusson, Westjohn, Semenov, Randrianasolo, & Zdravkovic, 2013). Competitors, suppliers, and consumers' behaviors are a few concepts of operational practices of RA (Griffith & Yalcinkaya, 2010). Bicen and Hunt (2012) noted the pedigree for the RA as the combination of a competitive environment and organizational resources. Hunt and Morgan (2012) posited that a firm's internal commitment to consumers is just as substantial as the external reactions' consumers have about personal preferences and competitor actions.

RA theory focuses on the firm's marketing strategy, competition, and business practices (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012). The goal of RA theory is to accomplish exceptional financial performance (Foss, 2012). Under RA theory, firms reach optimal market advantage over competitors in the same industry when they successfully deploy their resources better than competitors (Hunt & Morgan, 1996). In RA strategy, competitive advantages and disadvantages are equally important to market segments and resource diversity (Hunt, 2012).

Customer Retention Practices

Customer attraction and retention are paramount to the survival of an organization. Alshurideh (2016) noted that it is significantly cheaper to retain existing customers than to attract new customers. A strong brand has the ability to both attract new customers and retain current customers (Fournier & Srinivasan, 2018). However, price-sensitive consumers may switch to an alternate brand if that brand has a promotion that reduces the price (Allender & Richards, 2012). McCrory, Pilcher, and McMillan, 2017 cited that poor customer service accounts for over 70% of customers leaving a brand. Stronger customer relationships improve customer retention (Maier & Prusty, 2016).

Retention strategies. Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) introduced offensive and defensive RM strategies that managers should implement to focus on attracting, retaining, and regaining lost customers. Vivek et al. noted that managers use offensive marketing strategies to consider what attracts consumers to the product or brand, while they use defensive marketing strategies to plan marketing goals that elevate brand switching.

Offensive growth and profitability marketing strategies include market penetration, market development, diversification, and product development (Bozkurt & Ergen, 2014). To meet defensive marketing goals, restaurant managers may implement differentiation-based marketing strategies such as product development, personal selling, marketing communications, and distribution (Khan, 2014b; Mohammed, Rashid, & Tahir, 2014).

Another customer retention practice involves the concept of customer experience. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) introduced the concept of customer experience as sensorial, broad, and emotional. Customer experience encompasses the what, where, when, and how consumers want to buy (Rousseau, 2015). Customer service acts as the catalyst for viral marketing through WOM communication. WOM is the exchange of information between individuals or groups of people about their experiences with products or services that can alter personal preferences or purchasing behaviors in the future (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014). Archer-Brown, Kampani, Mardaer, Bal, and Kietzmann (2017) reported that over 15 billion conversations on brand impressions occur amongst consumers in the United States weekly, with approximately 75% occurring face-to-face, 15% via telephone, and 10% online. Hudson, Huang, Roth, and Madden (2016) asserted that when consumers shared product and service experiences, electronic WOM was more impactful than traditional WOM. WOM communication is a highly influential marketing tool (Dadzie, Amponsah, Dadzie, & Winston, 2017). Fulgoni and Lipsman (2015) explained that sharing or the lack of sharing through WOM could impact consumer final purchase decisions. Therefore, electronic WOM can significantly influence the success of any business (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016).

Customer service extends far beyond point-of-sale into what Rousseau (2015) refers to as an exceptional, successful, and consistent experience. As a result, satisfied customers are more likely to share their experiences and refer others to those businesses. New consumers typically rely on WOM communications when considering service providers they have not yet experienced (Yaman, 2018). Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto (2013) acknowledged that previous scholars concluded brands with powerful personalities have the ability to stimulate favorable brand equity amongst consumers, which may positively impact WOM referrals and consumer repurchase intentions. Businesses should have a positive social presence to establish influential reputations amongst consumers.

Customer loyalty and reward programs. Customer loyalty plays a significant role in the profitability of a company (Valenzuela, 2012). While loyalty programs can generate additional benefits to the company, Khan (2014a) noted loyalty and reward programs are only as successful as the consumer's perception of value. Customers typically enroll in loyalty rewards programs if the value of the reward outweighs the cost associated with being a member of the program to inherit the rewards (Meyer-Waarden, 2015). The intention of loyalty rewards programs is to reward customers based on their accumulated purchasing history, which in turn, encourages repeat business to retain existing customers and encourage customer loyalty (Maity & Gupta, 2016).

Consumer rewards often create a perceived value that encourages the customers' participation (Meyer-Waarden, 2013). Maity and Gupta (2016) found consumer's involvement with rewards programs often encouraged immediate purchases to expedite incentive values and overall customer satisfaction. Meyer-Waarden (2015) noted that customers prefer immediate, tangible rewards versus delayed, intangible rewards. Loyalty programs include incentives such as gifts, rewards, dedicated consumer support, and member status levels (Henderson, Beck, & Palmatier, 2011). Establishing reputable loyalty programs can create psychological bonds amongst consumers that could potentially increase purchases and reduce desires to switch to competitors (Henderson et al., 2011).

Ajzen (2011) found that implementing various loyalty programs can increase store revenue by manipulating consumers' shopping patterns. These incentives may stimulate the attention of new consumers while maintaining the satisfaction of existing consumers. Because customers dictate how they spend their money, managers should try to meet the needs and wants of customers to create repeat business. Maier and Prusty (2016) suggested managers offer loyalty incentives unique to repeat customers to enhance long-term relationships.

Firms create loyalty reward programs to entice customers to consistently conduct business with their organization. Companies benefit from these loyalty and reward programs through repeat business and the ability to generate a wealth of information relating to consumers' shopping preferences and patterns (Cant & Toit, 2012). Companies benefit from customers that become life-time members because they increase customer value and reduce the impact of rivals (Baxter, 2018).

Consumer behavior. In business, managers are challenged with implementing creative and unique strategies to attract new customers, sustain current customers, and increase profits, all while trying to understand consumer behavior (Brexendorf et al., 2015). Consumer purchase behavior is a consumer's favorable perceived value and a desirable purchase intention resulting in an outcome of intention to purchase (Ajzen, 1991). Kotler and Armstrong (2016) noted cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors influence consumer behavior. Garg (2012) emphasized that marketing managers must be willing to adapt to organizational changes that may shift marketing strategically because of brand impressions and influences on consumer's buying behaviors. Understanding various consumer segments or audiences is something marketing managers must do to maximize marketing efforts. This task, known as psychographics, is the process of classifying individuals based on their lifestyle and psychological dimensions (Burns & Harrison, 1979). Classification is often gauged by an individual's personality traits such as opinions, values, beliefs, and interests. Ajzen (1991) found that to attain the response that industry leaders' desire from consumers, intention and resources must be readily available to the consumer.

Once consumer behavior toward a brand becomes repetitive, there is an opportunity to create sustainable consumer behavior. White, Habib, and Hardisty (2019) defined sustainable consumer behavior as the decrease of natural resources and adverse environmental impacts that occur over the lifecycle of the product, service, or behavior. White et al. (2019) identified five routes to influence sustainable consumer behaviors: (a) *social influence*, factors that impact consumers based on the perspectives, actions, or presence of others; (b) *habit formation*, factors that involve habitual repetition; (c) *the individual self*, factors that create positive views of one's self; (d) *feelings and cognition*, factors involving negative and positive emotions; and (e) *tangibility*, factors that make potential benefits discernable.

Peng and Li (2019) asserted that consumers purchase products and services based on their love and loyalty to the brand. Moreover, it is the consumer's actual purchase of the product that represents their actual purchase behavior. Additionally, it is imperative to remember that time, money, attitudes, and beliefs can alter behavior (Ajzen, 1991). When loyal customers have pleasant purchasing experiences, they will recant those moments with their friends and families (Askari, Aghadavood, & Dehaghi, 2014). Baxter (2018) noted that when a customer becomes comfortable and satisfied, with an organization's products or services, they cease their search for other comparative options. This allows customers the ability to move their focus away from comparative analysis to other areas of life. Moreover, with advancements in technology, consumers can evaluate competitors, with up-to-date and real-time feedback, to make more informed decisions.

Brand image and perceived quality are essential factors that potential customers consider when making purchase preferences generated through other customers' WOM experiences (Yaman, 2018). Additionally, brand awareness and brand quality have a direct impact on consumer behavior and marketing strategies that ultimately reduce consumer risk (Rubio, Oubina, & Villasenor, 2014). When considering consumer behavior, managers should recognize the importance of the communication process between the business and the consumer. Customer service is an exchange between companies and customers with the ultimate objective of improving the customer's service experience (Wong, Lai, Cheng, Lun, 2015). Oke and Dawson (2012) found a friendly atmosphere attracts consumers, making it conducive for company managers to build and sustain relationships.

Transition

Section 1 included a background of the problem, the problem and purpose statement, nature of the study, research and interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, the significance of the study, and a review of professional and academic literature. In Section 2, I provide a restatement of the purpose statement, a description of my role as the researcher, the participant's selection process, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection Instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability and validity, and transition and summary. In Section 3, I present an overview of the research findings, the application for professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for further study, the researcher's reflection, and summary and conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I delve into the research methodology used to explore customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. I present project information that includes the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. The target population included all senior- and mid-level managers in three upscale full-service restaurants in the southeastern United States who have successfully developed customer retention strategies to improve brand equity. Positive social change may occur as restaurant managers are able to increase clientele and stay in business, thereby creating consistent revenue for local communities.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays a critical role in the data collection process (Clark & Veale, 2018). The researcher's role in a qualitative multiple case study is participatory. The researcher seeks to build rapport, interact socially with participants, and collect and analyze data (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Qualitative researchers investigate and interpret participants' real-life experiences as they relate to the subject matter (Alase, 2017). As the primary data instrument for this qualitative multiple case study, I administered face-to-face interviews with the participants. My career and educational background are in business, sales, marketing, and education. Previous experience with marketing and sales in the restaurant industry contributed to my knowledge in the research area. However, although familiar with the restaurant industry, I lacked intrinsic knowledge of restaurant management or ownership, and I did not have any previous relationships with the participants, which reduced the potential for researcher bias.

To reduce bias, every researcher should strive to avoid primary conflicts of interest, which are often influenced by secondary factors such as personal interest or financial gain (Bero, 2017). Methodologically, I checked for bias throughout the interview process through member checking. The use of member checking ensures that researchers do not interpret data according to their purposes by providing study participants the opportunity to verify that the researcher has interpreted their words according to the participants' intentions (Abedini, Stack, & Goodman, 2018). Moreover, I drew data from multiple sources to reach data saturation. Data saturation refers to the point in data collection when the data start to be repetitive (Tran, Porcher, Tran, & Ravaud, 2017). By interviewing participants from multiple restaurants as well as consulting the existing literature, I mitigated the risk of bias influencing the results of the study.

In accordance with *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), researchers must ensure they implement ethical practices during the research process by treating all participants with respect, beneficence, and justice. Adherence to the practices in *The*

Belmont Report assists researchers with ensuring they do not deceive, harm, or exploit participants (Clark, 2019). I used a consent form that addressed the Belmont Report principles and the parameters of the study. By doing so, I ensured all participants' information remained confidential. To further remove bias, I remained objective and kept an open mind regarding participants and their responses.

My role in this qualitative multiple case study was to interview participants, collect data, analyze data, and manage data to culminate the research process. I used an in-depth interview protocol (Appendix A) to obtain valid and reliable qualitative data. In qualitative research, researchers use the data collection process to acquire participants' real-world experiences through unstructured and flexible strategies that produce open-ended responses (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). While gathering information through semistructured interviews, I maximized efforts to protect participants' privacy. Researchers need to refine their interview questions to align with the research question and to facilitate a conversation that furthers their specific line of inquiry (Yeong, Ismail, Ismail, & Hamzah, 2018). The use of an interview protocol provided leeway for extended responses from respondents at the same time as the questions guided the respondents to provide relevant information such that interviews produced the necessary data to draw reliable and valid results (see Appendix A). I performed member checking to allow participants to reflect on their experiences to enhance the validity of my interpretation of their interview responses.

Participants

To ensure participants meet eligibility requirements for a study, qualitative researchers look for a variety of perspectives among participants in natural settings to enhance the exploration of the phenomena (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The participants for this study met the following criteria: (a) served in a managerial role of an upscale fine-dining restaurant and (b) had experience with marketing strategies to increase customer retention and to improve brand equity. Because I explored the strategies managers use in upscale full-service restaurants, finding participants who had worked in this environment with experience using customer retention strategies to improve brand equity provided the most useful data.

To gain access to senior- and mid-level managers at three upscale full-service restaurants, I reached out to the CEO or contact person via email and asked if the CEO would be willing to introduce me to the restaurants' managers. Because managers handle multiple tasks simultaneously, an introduction from a CEO or other senior leader of the restaurant provided a good initial introduction for me to meet the managers. Upon receiving introductions to managers, I introduced myself to potential participants and gave a brief overview of the research study. After solidifying volunteers, I contacted restaurant managers via phone and in person to schedule interviews. Jentoft and Olsen (2019) insisted that researchers must use a strategy that creates a level of comfort for informants to freely share insights regarding the research topic. To increase participants' comfort, I presented each participant with a consent form, explained the form to them, and requested their signature at the start of the first interview. I also let them know that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Researchers should establish a healthy rapport with respondents to put them at ease and encourage persistent participation during the interview (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2017). By expressing genuine interest in participants' responses, as well as carefully explaining the purpose of the study, I strove to make the participants feel important to the research process. Additionally, interview scheduling accommodated the participants' availability. The most optimal time to make appointments with interviewees is when they are completely relaxed with no pressing or pending obligations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I conducted participant interviews outside of usual business hours to ensure the availability and focus of the participants.

Research Method and Design

The following section provides an overview of the methodology and design of the research study. I used a qualitative multiple case study design to answer the research question for this study. In the following sections, I explain methodologies and designs that highlighted the most appropriate methods for this study.

Research Method

A qualitative research method was the most appropriate method for answering this study's research question regarding the strategies that restaurant managers use to improve customer loyalty and brand equity. When choosing a research method, a researcher may select a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method. Researchers use a qualitative methodology to explore a phenomenon through valid arguments (Marshall &

Rossman, 2016). Qualitative methods allow researchers to explore, describe, and explain an individual's subjective experiences through in-depth understanding from a small sample size (Leavy, 2017). Interviewing managers of fine dining restaurants allowed for a rich understanding of the strategies they used to improve customer loyalty and brand equity. In qualitative research, smaller sample sizes can be sustained when researchers reach their desired level of data saturation from the variety of informants, the broadness of the phenomenon, and the richness of data collected (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). A qualitative method was appropriate for this study because the focus of the research was on successful strategies used by three restaurant managers. The small sample size enabled a thorough investigation of the strategies and reasoning used by three successful managers. Qualitative studies are appropriate for use when researchers want to understand a group's behaviors, motivations, and perceptions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The study included open-ended semistructured interview questions with participants, observations, and the exploration of documentation to gather research data. Open-ended questions provide researchers with a detailed understanding often through short answers or lists of topics being explored (Weller, 2018). Participants' responses provided insight into managerial-level business strategies and their understandings of those strategies.

Researchers use a quantitative methodology to develop generalizations through a series of closed-ended questions based on the results of testing hypotheses and theories (Green et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). Closed-ended questions provide a platform for respondents to select answers from predetermined categories (Malhotra, 2007). The aim of researchers using quantitative methods is to test hypotheses to prove or disprove existing theories (Leavy, 2017). A quantitative method was not appropriate for answering the research question for this study because my focus was not on revealing large-scale patterns. Therefore, I did not select a quantitative research method for this study as I wanted to obtain a deeper understanding of strategies upscale full-service restaurant managers used to increase customer retention to improve brand equity.

Researchers choose a mixed methods approach when they desire to combine both the qualitative and quantitative methodologies to analyze questions and hypotheses (Yin, 2018). The aim of researchers using mixed methods is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon they are investigating (Leavy, 2017). A mixed methods approach was not appropriate for this research study because the aim of this study was to explore the customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers used to improve brand equity. The aim of the study is not to test theories or hypotheses, which are components of quantitative studies. Because mixed methods research contains quantitative elements, this method was not suitable for my research study.

Research Design

For this study, I considered ethnography, phenomenology, and case study qualitative research designs. In an ethnographic design, the researcher focuses on the characteristics in a cultural setting to identify cultural aspects (Wolcott, 2010). Furthermore, ethnography involves the immersion of the researcher into the participant context for the researcher to understand the participant's way of life with as much complexity as possible (Madden, 2017). Ethnography was not appropriate for this study, as the study's research question was not about restaurant or restaurant management culture. Additionally, I did not observe cultural patterns and meanings in a cultural or social group because the study's research question focused on business strategies, and it was not necessary to understand the whole culture and personal context of the study participants.

Researchers use a phenomenological design to understand the personal meanings of participants' lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). Phenomenological studies explore the perceptions, motivations, and experiences of participants to gain complex knowledge about a specific phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). A phenomenological approach was not appropriate for this study as the goal was to identify and understand strategies employed by upscale full-service restaurant managers to retain customers and not to explore the participants' experiences employing those strategies.

In case study research, a researcher explores phenomenon to seek to understand a problem through units of study (Yin, 2018). Researchers may select a single case study design when exploring a unique set of circumstances, or a multiple case study design used when observing multiple variants in similar phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Yin (2017) asserted a case study research design has distinct components: (a) study questions, (b) study propositions, (c) defining and bounding the case(s), (d) data linked to propositions, and (e) criteria for interpretation. Researchers use a case study design to answer explanatory questions like *how* and *why* about social phenomena in their environmental contexts (Rider, 2017; Yin, 2017). According to Rider (2017), multiple case studies are instrumental in researchers' abilities to advance theory through the differentiation of cases. A multiple case study design was appropriate for this study to explore how three upscale full-service restaurants' managers had successfully used strategies to increase customer loyalty to improve brand equity. Using a multiple case study design, I collected data from participants in the form of face-to-face interviews. In addition to interviews, I incorporated triangulation from alternate sources such as participants, observations, and documentation. Addressing the research question involved summarizing and analyzing the information provided through semistructured interviews.

According to Polit and Beck (2017), data saturation is the point in a qualitative study where attaining additional data no longer adds value to the current phenomenon. Researchers can confirm significant data collection when new analytical information becomes redundant (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). To ensure data saturation, I interviewed multiple restaurant leaders until no new information was provided. To enhance the potential for reaching data saturation, I used methodological triangulation. Triangulation increases the level of validity and reliability of data analysis because of the use of multiple data sources (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018). Additionally, I implemented member checking. Abedini et al. (2018) asserted that the member checking technique is essential, as it allows participants the opportunity to review, validate, and amend study results.

Population and Sampling

In qualitative research, experts debate over the ideal sample size that one should consider when conducting a research study (Dworkin, 2012). The population for this qualitative multiple case study included select senior- and mid-level managers in three upscale full-service restaurants in the southeastern United States who had successfully developed customer retention strategies to improve brand equity.

Purposive sampling was the best sampling method for answering this study's research question. Researchers may choose from purposive, convenience, or snowball sampling when developing their research study. Convenience sampling involves researchers choosing participants who are accessible to the researcher based on proximity, availability, and willingness to participate (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2015). Researchers use snowball sampling to reach participants they might not initially have access to by gaining new participants through the suggestion of other participants (Wohl et al., 2017). Purposive sampling involves the researcher deliberately choosing participants based on the qualities they possess (Tongco, 2008). Purposive sampling supports the researcher's judgment in selecting participants who will offer detailed and informed responses (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Additionally, the use of purposive sampling allows researchers to deliberately select informants who possess specific qualities that will provide reliable and robust data (Tongco, 2008). Purposive sampling was most appropriate for this study because it was the most efficient approach option for answering the study's research question. Because each restaurant only uses certain strategies and only select employees are responsible for marketing and branding, it was only necessary to interview some managers from each restaurant.

The criteria for selecting participants included (a) senior- and mid-level managers of upscale full-service restaurants that have served in a managerial role and (b) have experience with marketing strategies to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. Qualitative researchers often focus on a small group of participants to gain a deeper view of their perspectives and lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Three participants engaged in semistructured interviews. I hosted interviews during non-business hours, which took place in the managers' work environment. Participants decided on the date and time of their interviews. When participants dictate the date and time of interviewing, it promotes positive engagement (Lunnay, Borlagdan, McNaughton, & Ward, 2015).

Data saturation and methodological triangulation enhanced the validity of the study. Researchers achieve data saturation when new data no longer arises or when participant responses duplicate one another (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Morse, 2015). Qualitative researchers can reach data saturation by involving multiple participants in the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). For this study, reaching data saturation involved interviewing participants from multiple restaurants.

Triangulation is an approach researchers use to obtain richer data and enhance the results of a research study (Wilson, 2014). Methodological triangulation refers to analyzing data from multiple sources, such as semistructured interviews, secondary data, and observations (Fusch et al., 2018). For this study, methodological triangulation involved comparisons of data collected from (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents and other marketing material related to brand equity and customer loyalty strategies.

Ethical Research

Dooly, Moore, and Vallejo (2017) noted that the privacy and confidentiality of human subjects are imperative components in a qualitative research study. It is the researcher's responsibility to treat participants with the utmost respect while orchestrating a morally sound and coherent study (Rallis & Lawrence, 2017). To comply with Walden University and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I required each participant to sign an informed consent form that provided clear parameters for the study. Informed consent forms allow researchers an opportunity to explain the research process, both verbally and in writing (Farrugia, 2019). These consent forms confirmed voluntary participation by each volunteer prior to any data collection. In addition, the forms informed participants that involvement in the research study was completely voluntary and did not include compensation or incentives. The consent form stated that participants could withdraw from the interview process at any time and that data collected prior to their withdrawal was subject to disclosure in the study's findings.

To ensure ethical protection of participants, I followed the guidelines laid out in *The Belmont Report*. Grech (2018) asserted that ethics and data protection are vital safeguards for maintaining human confidentiality in the research process. *The Belmont Report* includes three major components of the researcher's treatment of participants: (a) self-governance, which gives the participant liberty to determine their level of involvement; (b) beneficence, which considers the welfare of the participants in participating; and (c) justice, which provides fairness for all participants involved in the study (Miracle, 2016).

Prior to any data collection, I went through the IRB approval (approval number 06-30-20-0740401) process. Upon receipt of IRB approval, I began the data collection process by conducting semistructured interviews and member checking until I achieved data saturation. I assigned pseudonyms to the three upscale full-service restaurants and the participants. I used assigned pseudonyms throughout the study to enhance the confidentiality and security of participants' personal information.

At the culmination of this research study, I stored research data located on external hard drives, thumb drives, and printed documents in a locked fireproof safe for a minimum of 5-years. Walden University requires such methods to protect the confidentiality of participants. Tripathi (2016) stated it is the researcher's responsibility to incorporate measures that preserve, safeguard, and protect participant's privacy.

Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Clark & Veale, 2018). For this qualitative multiple case study, I served as the primary data collection instrument. Data collection methods in qualitative research vary from extensive interviews and note-taking to detailed tape recordings (Renz, Carrington, & Badger, 2018). To strengthen the reliability and validity of the data collection process, I incorporated additional secondary data collection instruments. These instruments included (a) semistructured interviews with follow-up member checking interviews, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) a review of company documents and other relevant marketing strategy material to significantly enhance the research process.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) argued researchers implement semistructured interviews to assist in generating comprehensive information to address the research question. Moreover, Marshall and Rossman (2016) contended the use of semistructured interviews allows researchers the ability to effectively capitalize on an individual's experiences pertaining to the research question. Likewise, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) characterized semistructured interviews as predetermined questions that the interviewer asks when applicable to probe the participant and gather additional dialogue during the interview. In practice, Perry (2014), used semistructured interviews in a previously conducted marketing research study to gain in-depth responses from participants regarding their use of marketing tactics. Using semistructured interviews allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions related to the study, which encourages participants to speak candidly about personal experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Researchers use semistructured interviews to gain additional understanding from participants through probing and clarifying questions (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Additionally, Lee, Lee, Chua, and Han (2016) asserted that using the semistructured approach gives the researcher pliability to clarify the participants' responses. I conducted semistructured interviews with three successful upscale, full-service restaurant managers who used strategies to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. These semistructured interviews contained 10 open-ended questions that generated in-depth perspectives from each participant regarding what methods they used to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. Open-ended questions allow researchers to explore concepts and topics in-depth (Weller et al., 2018).

Miller (2017) posited that face-to-face interviews establish rapport, allowing researchers to gain rich, in-depth data from individuals' daily experiences in the social world. Castillo-Montoya (2016) asserted that using an interview protocol assists the researcher during semistructured interviews to avoid bias by following a similar pattern when asking participants interview questions. Similarly, Fusch and Ness (2015) found it beneficial for interviewers to structure questions in a manner that allows multiple participants the ability to respond to the same questions in a similar order. I employed an interview protocol to attempt to maintain a similar pattern, which I garnered thorough answers from each participant. Furthermore, I used follow-up member checking interviews.

Member checking allows the researcher to gain approval from the respondent when reviewing personal interview material (Thomas, 2017). If contradictions arise during a member check, the researcher must complete an analysis on the data to align the participant and the researcher's interpretations to ensure the viewpoints of both parties are accurate and agreed upon (Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017). I employed member checking a few days after completing the interviews, once I had time to interpret the participants' responses to ensure correct interpretation.

In addition to semistructured interviews with follow-up member-checking interviews, I used direct observation. Direct observation involves observing individuals in their environment without altering the said environment (Holmes, 2013). Landsberger (1985) asserted that the use of direct observation provides researchers the opportunity to examine behaviors in real-time, in situations that allow for an understanding of contextual factors. De Massis and Kotlar (2014) posited that direct observations expose rich insight about human, social, and organizational aspects of the company, while company documents provide un-assumed details about the company. Secondary data can save the researcher time, money, and energy (O'Leary, 2017). Moreover, incorporating secondary data enhances the results of the study through triangulation (Wahyuni, 2012). I analyzed and incorporated data from company documentation such as company websites, promotional offers, social media, publications, a reflective journal, and other relevant marketing literature and material. Triangulation immensely increases the reliability and validity of a study's data and results (Fusch et al., 2018).

Data Collection Technique

For this case study, the research question was: What customer retention strategies do upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity? Researchers employ various data collection techniques to include company documents, interviews, participant-observations, archival records, direct observations, focus groups, and physical artifacts (Morse & Coulehan, 2014; Yin 2018). In this study, I used (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents to collect data. Integrating multiple types of data and perspectives increases the depth and breadth of the study through triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Deakin and Wakefield (2014) posited that interviews are the predominant data collection technique in qualitative case studies. In-depth interviews are vital components that encourage participants to share detailed, intricate responses of real-world experiences

(Oberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Gruber, 2011; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Rowley (2012), recommended researchers dedicate a minimum of 30 minutes to each interview. However, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explained semistructured interviews can vary significantly in length from 30 minutes to several hours. Based on this recommendation, I conducted hour-long in-depth face-to-face semistructured interviews via Livescribe to gain insight into the strategies upscale full-service restaurant managers use to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. Livescribe is a smartpen that researchers use to voice record interviews, take notes, and transfer data electronically for future analysis. I used an interview protocol as a guide while conducting interviews. An interview protocol provides a systematic outline of the researcher's interview plan and research questions with intentions to enhance the overall quality of data provided through strategic steps (Yeong et al., 2018). Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggested that the semistructured interviews create an atmosphere to gain comprehensive knowledge about the research question.

In addition to hour-long in-depth interviews enhanced by technology, a final advantage of conducting semistructured interviews is the interviewer’s ability to observe participants' verbal and nonverbal cues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Using verbal and nonverbal cues, researchers can ask probing questions based on the cues observed during semistructured interviews. Conversely, there are three notable disadvantages to qualitative research: (a) interviewer and interviewee bias can skew the accuracy of data collected during semistructured interviews, (b) participants’ attempts to interpret the research questions to provide accurate answers can inhibit their truthfulness and forthrightness, and (c) finding the optimal time to accommodate participants' schedules to host an interview can pose challenges to conducting semistructured interviews (Rahman, 2015; Yin, 2018). Carlson (2010) noted that through member checking, the researcher could offset such issues by critically sifting through their interpretations of the participant's interview for accuracy, remaining transparent, and adopting an open-door process by giving participants a voice throughout the process. Member checking is a technique that involves obtaining and summarizing interview data accurately to ensure the reliability and validity of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). After completing each interview, I scheduled a 10-20-minute follow-up meeting approximately a week after the initial interview to provide respondents with my interpretations of their answers to the interview questions, which allowed an opportunity for participants to make corrections to any misinterpretations or to provide additional insights.

Direct observations contribute to the development of a robust case study. Through direct observation, researchers can monitor individuals firsthand in social settings (Suchan & Brewer, 2000). I used an observation protocol (Appendix B) to guide me through the observation process. I spent 2 hours a day, 3 days a week over the course of 2 weeks taking detailed field notes of my observations regarding how managers address situations with the customers in their upscale full-service restaurant establishment; however, I only recorded the behaviors and strategies that I observed the participants use. One advantage of direct observation is the researcher's ability to observe the individuals' nonverbal actions first-hand and in real-time (Yin, 2018). One challenge with direct observation involves the potential for individuals to display artificial or altered behaviors as a result of the observer's presence (Gould et al., 2017). To address this issue, I honed in on the information gained by using the observation protocol.

While conducting my research, I kept a reflective journal to record my thoughts, assumptions, and experiences throughout the research process. Researchers use reflective journals throughout their research process to heighten awareness of possible biases, which includes participant validation through member checking and triangulation procedures (Morse, 2015; Thomas, 2017). Keeping a reflective journal was beneficial for future study replication because I tracked each decision and step as I progressed. One advantage of keeping a reflective journal is researchers can continually collect data while simultaneously identifying concepts or ideas to compare with incoming data to gauge the repetition of data (Brawley & Pury, 2014; Mayer, 2015). Dreyer (2015) contends the disadvantages of reflective journaling include the time-consuming nature of the process and that effective reflective journaling requires disciplined researchers with a commitment to consistency.

Finally, I obtained and reviewed secondary documents from each restaurant relating to marketing and business strategies that managers use to increase customer retention and improve brand equity. These documents included company websites, promotional offers, social media, publications, and other relevant marketing literature and material. The collection of secondary documentation provides historical data to the research study adding value to the overall findings (El Haddad, 2015). Owen (2014) hypothesized that providing additional public and internal documents in conjunction with interviews increases the validity of the study. One advantage of collecting company documentation includes the researcher's ability to review information as many times as necessary to ensure accuracy (Yin, 2014). Drawbacks to the use of company data in case study research involve access to documents and reporting bias in documents (Yin, 2017). To mitigate these biases, I triangulated several data collection methods, including (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews conducted with each senior- and mid-level managers, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) a review of company documents. Collecting multiple data sources enhances the credibility of findings collected from interviews and secondary data (Wahyuni, 2012). Abdalla, Oliveira, Azevedo, and Gonzalez (2018) noted that exploring the research problem from various angles and sources of data are critical to eliminating personal and methodological bias to maximize the potential of duplicating research findings.

Data Organization Technique

Data organization techniques, such as privacy and confidentiality, are critical components implemented by researchers to safeguard the rights of humans during research studies (Grech, 2018). Yin (2014) asserted that researchers should not only exercise care in the collection of data, but they should create a database to organize data and enhance the validity and reliability of results. Hahn (2008) noted researchers use a plethora of techniques to organize the data collected during the research process. Moreover, Bengtsson, (2016) contended that qualitative researchers use filing systems to maintain confidentiality and enhance integrity. I used both Yin's and Bengstsson's data organization techniques by creating an electronic database and an organized data filing system, which included meaningful labels to make it easy to retrieve data. To safeguard participants, I organized the key concepts and ideas of similar data from (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews conducted with each senior- and mid-level managers, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents into a confidential and secure list coded in NVivo 12. This organization process was where I began methodological triangulation to prepare for data analysis.

After reviewing the information, I coded and compiled the concepts and ideas from each of the data sources. Researchers use coding in qualitative research studies to transition verbal data collected via field notes, company documents, response transcripts, and other relevant literature to data analysis (Clark & Veale, 2018). Using NVivo software, researchers can import a broad range of internal and external sources to identify concepts and ideas and create codes for pairing analysis systems (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). I then used NVivo 12 software to sort keywords, common phrases, and patterns into categories by grouping similar responses from participants. I used coding stripes to highlight different concepts and ideas to help me throughout the identification process.

In qualitative research, participant confidentiality is the responsibility of the researcher (Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015). It was my goal to safeguard participants by using tactics to enhance confidentiality. Assigning confidential numbers or codes to transcriptions and tapes will safeguard the identity of individuals who freely share vital information relating to a study (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). I assigned pseudonyms to the three upscale full-service restaurants and the participants. Additionally, I created a password-protected digital filing system to collect, organize, and maintain data and backed up the data on an external hard drive and a thumb drive. In alignment with IRB requirements, I secured the external hard drive, thumb drive, printed copies of research data, and all other pertinent research material in a locked fireproof safe for a minimum of 5-years. These initiatives preserved confidentiality until the destruction of all material at the end of the 5-year timeframe.

Data Analysis

Data analysis refers to specific processes used to identify and compare key factors amongst multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Suchan & Brewer, 2000). The use of data analysis aides researchers in qualitative studies by providing an array of information and diverse perspectives (Fisher & Stenner, 2011). Yin (2012) asserted that data analysis is (a) organized and prepared, (b) analyzed for clear meanings of data, (c) structured using word patterns, (d) used to generate common themes, (e) consolidated to connect events into a story, and (f) comprehended. Marshall and Rossman (2016) expressed the importance of establishing an organized data collection system with easy retrieval for the data analysis phase. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity.

The appropriate method to assess, interpret, and make conclusions for the data generated during this study was methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation refers to research studies where the researcher uses a combination of data sources to describe a phenomenon (Denzin, 1978). Varpio et al. (2017) associated triangulation with rigor asserting that the use of one single data collection method is not as effective as using multiple data sources to compare perspectives. I used methodological triangulation to collect data from multiple primary and secondary sources to aide in the assessment, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion of information collected.

Yin (2018) asserted that data analysis allows a researcher to discover key themes and patterns within a research study that addresses the research question. To analyze the data collected for this study, I conducted a thematic analysis to uncover the themes of the study on strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. Thematic analysis is a technique used for identifying, analyzing, reporting, and describing themes from ideas and concepts found within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Novice researchers who are relativity new to qualitative methods often gravitate to thematic analysis because it is easy to grasp with a relatively quick learning curve (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). To prepare for methodological triangulation, I integrated NVivo 12 software to better transmit, organize, and analyze the concepts and ideas from the multiple data collection techniques.

NVivo software provides a platform for researchers to experiment with varying interpretations and data analysis based on codes without the risk of altering original codes established by the computer-aided software (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). Sotiriadou, Brouwers, and Le (2014) described NVivo 12 as a qualitative data analysis software that researchers use to compare triangulated data into core and subsequent themes. Researchers use NVivo software to support methodological triangulation by continually running a comparison analysis that enhances the coding of data and identifying themes

(Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). I used NVivo 12 to categorize and sort data and identify themes. Rubin and Rubin (2012) emphasized the usefulness of software programs to retrieved coded data; however, it is the researcher's responsibility to analyze the data to identify concepts and themes relating to their research question.

The first step in the data analysis process involved reviewing information gathered from (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews conducted with each senior- and mid-level manager, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents. A review of each information source helped assist with methodological triangulation and data saturation. Methodological triangulation is the use of multiple data sources to describe a phenomenon adding depth and breadth to the level of data saturation (Denzin, 1978; Fusch et al., 2018). Data saturation is the point at which the research study produces no new information or coding (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Specifically, I looked for data alignment as I methodologically triangulated the concepts and ideas from my different data collection methods: (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews conducted with each senior- and mid-level manager, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents. I then conducted an in-depth analysis of the data categorized during the data organization phase. During the process of analyzing the data, I critically reviewed data from all categories multiple times to determine what the data in each category represented. As I analyzed the data, I focused on clustering statements that revealed similar meanings. Then, I used NVivo graphical portrayal and mind maps to create visual interactions of the data and to link related categories of coded concepts and ideas with lines and varying color marks to further understand the interactions between the data. Finally, I interpreted the meaning of data in key categories of coded concepts and ideas to determine themes, which represented my study findings related to customer retention strategies to improve brand equity.

Based on the output, I determined whether the concepts and ideas that I found throughout the research study correlated to previous research studies or whether they were emergent themes. Groenewald (2014) indicated researchers notice common concepts and ideas when they conduct a thorough analysis of overlapping clusters. Finally, I correlated the themes with the literature and conceptual framework of my research study. Yin (2018) asserted it is essential that researchers correlate all critical themes to the literature and conceptual framework to establish the credibility of the findings. It was my goal to follow a structured data analysis process that consisted of methodological triangulation and quality coding practices to enhance the validity and reliability of the study.

Reliability and Validity

Researchers conducting a qualitative study must consider reliability and validity as two intricate components during each phase of a study, and they should further include design, analyzation, and overall quality (Cypress, 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced four distinct elements that create trustworthiness in a qualitative research study. These four elements are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Researchers increase reliability and validity in qualitative research studies by collecting multiple types of data to provide true and accurate information (Mohajan, 2017). Researchers establish reliability when homogenous results occur with repetitive methods administered on various study participants in similar environments (Abdalla et al., 2018). Additionally, researchers confirm validity when truthful and factual empirical evidence resonates (Cypress, 2017).

Reliability

The level of dependability of data are crucial to a researcher's study. Qualitative researchers ensure dependability, often also referred to as reliability, by preserving consistency throughout the research process (Mohajan, 2017). Dependability is an assessment tool's ability to produce consistent results that are free from error (Mohajan, 2017). To ensure dependability, I incorporated member checking to minimize human errors and mistakes. Member checking may occur as a single occurrence for participants to review and confirm interpretations of their interviews (Carlson, 2010). Researchers can increase dependability by providing participants member checking opportunities to enhance the findings of the research study (Thomas, 2017). I was transparent regarding my intended process to transcribe (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews with each senior- and mid-level manager, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents relating to the overall research process.

Validity

Researchers use different methods to enhance the validity of a study. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability play an intricate role in the reliability and validity of a study. Korstjens and Moser (2018) suggested the quality of qualitative research can be gauged by five distinct elements: credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and reflexivity. Along with assuring dependability, member checking helps to validate a study's findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I conducted member checking by validating the accuracy of my interpretation to reduce response bias and promote validity.

Credibility. In qualitative research, member checking sustains the researcher's ability to use direct quotes or share various information with pre-approval from the participant (Thomas, 2017). To maintain credibility, I disseminated clear and concise explanations, in addition to conducting member checking throughout the entire research process. Through member checking, the researcher provides participants summaries of the researcher's interpretation of what the participant said to ensure accuracy (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Prior to finalizing the research study, I gave participants the opportunity to review my interpreted summary and make corrections or add additional insight. The credibility of a study is imperative for participants who are relying on the results to improve business practices (Candela, 2019). To achieve credibility, researchers should select an ample number of participants who have a working knowledge of the phenomenon under review, which will help researchers generate enough data to cover significant variations of the study (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017). Credibility is the authentic representation of participant views based on the interpretation of the data collected (Polit & Beck, 2012). Methodological triangulation immensely increases validity and reliability because the researcher incorporates multiple data collection techniques to acquire an exhaustive view of a phenomenon while increasing depth and breadth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Fusch et al., 2018). Triangulation is another key element used to maximize credibility and enhance the trustworthiness of studies (Varpio et al., 2017). To enhance the study creditability, I used methodological triangulation to correlate the concepts and ideas that I gained from the (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews with each senior- and mid-level manager, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents relating to the overall research process.

Transferability. Transferability refers to the extent to which a qualitative research study is considered transferable to other settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In a qualitative study, the researcher successfully reaches transferability when individuals that are unassociated with the study find the results meaningful or relatable (Cope, 2014). Graneheim et al. (2017) suggested that for transferability, the strategic selection of participants is just as imperative as providing distinct details regarding the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that a researcher cannot guarantee the transferability of the research findings. Likewise, Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that the reader ultimately determines the transferability of a study's results. I addressed transferability by providing rich and thick descriptions of a phenomenon, allowing others to determine the transferability of my findings.

Confirmability. In qualitative research, researchers use the term confirmability to refer to the extent to which others can substantiate the results of a study (Polit & Beck, 2012). To maximize confirmability, researchers should expose how they established conclusions, thereby proving that they drew the findings directly from the results of the study (Cope, 2014). Researchers can also use triangulation to help establish confirmability by providing multiple substantiating information sources, which demonstrates the data's trustworthiness (Abdalla et al., 2018). I addressed confirmability by collecting data from multiple sources, allowing participants to review what they shared during their interviews as a part of member checking, and providing them the opportunity to review their interview transcripts.

Data Saturation. Data saturation refers to a researcher achieving the maximum level of insight on a phenomenon (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Methodological triangulation encompasses multiple sources of data that add depth to the level of data saturation of a study (Fusch et al., 2018). Tran et al. (2017) postulated researchers arrive at data saturation at different intervals of a study depending on the richness and abundance of information obtained from the study, as judged by the researcher. Fusch and Ness (2015) affirmed that the triangulation of data ensures data are rich and in-depth to help achieve data saturation. To ensure I reached data saturation, I employed (a) semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews with each senior- and mid-level manager, (b) direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents from three upscale full-service restaurant managers who used customer retention strategies to improve brand equity and increase repeat business.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. In Section 2, I provided details by expounding on and explaining the role of the researcher, criteria for participants, research methods and design, sample population, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection techniques, data analysis, reliability, and validity. Additionally, I discussed using a qualitative multiple case study, purposive sampling, and data saturation. In Section 3, I present the study's findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for actions and further research, study reflections, and a summary to conclude the study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. My data collection consisted of (a) virtual semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) in-person direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, and (d) company documents and other marketing material related to brand equity and customer loyalty strategies. Data were collected from three senior-level managers at three upscale full-service restaurants in the southeastern United States. As a result of my data analysis, four distinct themes emerged from the study (a) brand differentiation through competitive advantage, (b) premium products and quality experiences, (c) employee engagement, and (d) word of mouth and online platforms.

The findings of this study revealed methods that upscale full-service restaurant managers can use to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. The participants confirmed that the brand equity theory was an appropriate model for this study. I will conclude this discussion with (a) a synthesis of the findings associated with each theme, (b) applicability of the findings with respect to professional practice, (c) implications to social change, (d) recommendations for actions and further research, (e) a reflection of my personal experience along this doctoral journey, and (f) a concluding statement.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this study was: What customer retention strategies do upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity? Using a purposive sample, I selected my population of participants from three different restaurants located in the southeastern United States. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I slightly altered my data collection process. To ensure my data collection process was well within the social distancing guidelines set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Walden University, I conducted a portion of my data collection process virtually. I conducted (a) virtual semistructured interviews with virtual member checking follow-up interviews with each senior-level manager, (b) in-person direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, (d) a review of company documents, and (e) a review of other marketing material related to brand equity and customer loyalty strategies provided by three senior- and mid-level managers from three different establishments. Items from these data sources included memorandums, spreadsheets, reports, customer loyalty programs, promotional campaigns, company websites, and social media sites. Based on the methodological triangulation of the data sources collected and a careful thematic analysis of the research, four distinctive themes emerged: (a) brand differentiation through competitive advantage, (b) premium products and quality experiences, (c) employee engagement, and (d) word of mouth and online platforms. The presentation of these findings includes figures that provide visual representations of the manifestations that arose from the data analysis process.

After completing the data collection process, I familiarized myself with the participant responses by manually completing transcriptions of the participants' interviews. Then to provide structure to my unstructured data, I processed the data using a rigorous systematic analysis through NVivo 12. Running word frequency queries allowed me to analyze frequently used words and phrases across all data, ignoring and excluding conjunction and filler words. Using NVivo 12, I generated word frequency queries, word clouds, word trees, and mind maps to garner a clear understanding of trends found in the interview transcripts. The word cloud represented in Figure 4 provides a visual representation of word frequency for this study. The larger the word, the more frequently it appeared across the data.

Figure 4. Image of word frequency cloud.

To generate emerging patterns and ideas from the qualitative data to create quotes and themes, I then organized and analyzed text-based data by creating nodes, codes, and queries. I created a mind map (see Figure 5) to present a visual hierarchy of qualitative data placed into buckets with related material to assist me with looking for emerging patterns and ideas. Incorporating the mind map tool helped me think through what my buckets or categories of qualitative data might be.

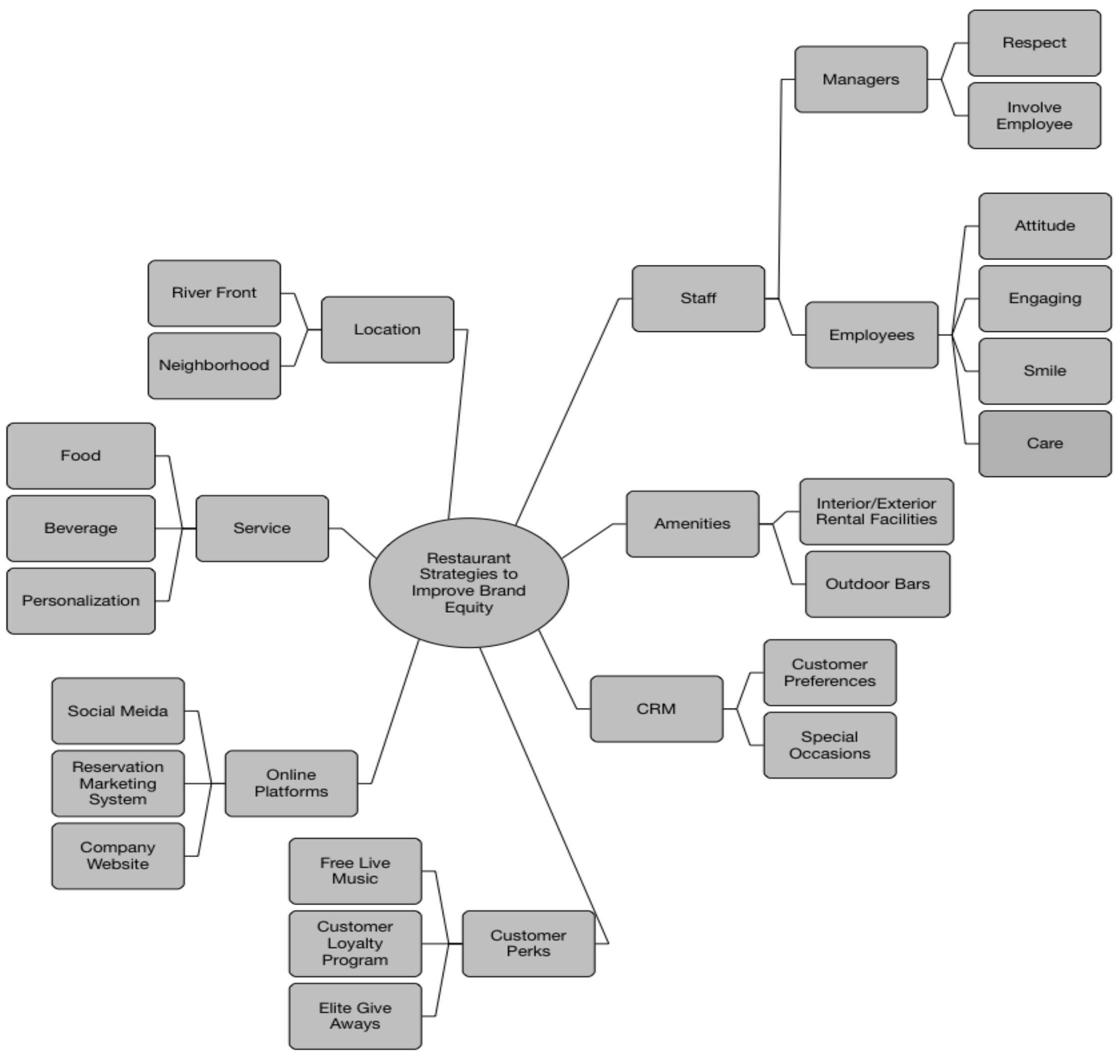

Figure 5. Image of a mind map with hierarchy buckets.

Performing data analysis using the NVivo 12 tool, I was able to identify relationships and code for overlaps in the data using color-coded nodes and stripes. Additionally, using NVivo 12 allowed me to focus on concepts and ideas to create themes relevant to the central research question and the conceptual framework for this study.

To enhance the privacy and confidentiality of participants involved in this study, I assigned the participants these unique pseudonyms: Calvin, Robert, and Sean. Participants' knowledge and expertise, along with a review of the information presented in my literature review, and an examination of the conceptual framework of brand equity theory allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the marketing strategies upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity. Each of the identified themes aligns with four fundamental components encompassed in brand equity theory and the CBBE model. The following is an analysis of the themes.

Theme 1: Brand Differentiation Through Competitive Advantage

The first theme to emerge from the data analysis was brand differentiation through competitive advantage. All participants acknowledged the importance of differentiating their brand from their competitors. Porter (1980) opined that in an aggressive competitive global economy, successful business owners must differentiate themselves. Information I collected from the participants during virtual semistructured interviews highlighted the importance of differentiating their brand from competitors. For example, Calvin (pseudonym) cited the importance of highlighting his restaurant's location as a method of differentiating from competitors:

> We are one of only two restaurants in the metropolitan area with river views during your dining or special event experience. We offer our guests indoor and outdoor private dining facilities for weddings, rehearsal dinners, and other private events. During the fall, we offer free live music by the river with an exterior bar that offers excellent cocktails and wine during all hours, including happy hour. We take full advantage of our location and try to offer as many experiences outside as possible. We built an additional bar outside to maximize that characteristic of the restaurant.

High brand equity results from effective marketing strategies (Aaker, 1991). Focused marketing on the unique location and outdoor offerings of a restaurant is an effective marketing strategy and can provide differentiation and increase competitive advantage. Calvin was not the only participant to mention marketing strategies related to location; Robert (pseudonym) also highlighted location as key to the restaurant maintaining competitive advantage,

> We have a great location with amazing views that afford our customers memorable pictures. Because of our location, we market specifically for huge events, such as weddings, engagements, and other major private events. We have amazing outdoor facilities that no one else in the city has. All those things make us marketable to people very easily.

Location is not the only means for obtaining differentiation. Business managers who provide consumers with meaningful products and services decrease threats from competitors motivating consumers to spend more for the distinct differences their products and service offer (Aaker, 1991). Berenguer, Gil, and Ruiz (2009) conducted a study confirming that upscale restaurant managers use product and service offerings as a differentiation strategy. The provision of quality service can also serve to differentiate businesses and can distinguish one competitor from another (Guchait, Pasamehmetoglu, & Lanze-Abbot, 2015). Sean (pseudonym) highlighted the importance of providing quality service to differentiate from competitors:

> Our establishment does not offer an extensive menu, and we rarely shift from our core menu. We offer quality staples that our customers count on being available and prepared in a quality manner and with the best ingredients – that includes food and beverages. The restaurant does not attempt to offer the latest and the greatest, but our signatures are consistently prepared well. This non-extensive menu is a distinction that ensures quality is delivered to our customers.

The absence of ambience resulting from a scenic riverfront location with outdoor dining options does not mean a restaurant is unable to differentiate; rather, restaurants can focus their marketing strategies on other components, such as the consistency of a high-quality menu. Whatever the focus, strong differentiation is key to the success and long-term sustainability of a brand (Bundy, 2017). Choi et al. (2017) emphasized that brand equity is an iconic element in the restaurant industry that assists managers with gaining momentum with competitive advantage through differentiation. In addition to the participants' interviews, brand differentiation through competitive advantage was also noted during direct observations, my reflective journal notes, and other marketing material such as the company websites.

During my direct observations, I witnessed serene scenic water views that distinctively differentiated Calvin's and Robert's restaurants from competitors. Three out of three of the managers differentiate their establishments by positioning themselves strategically in neighborhood locations for the convenience of their clientele. Archer-Brown et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of meeting consumers' needs as a pertinent aspect of competitive advantage. Robert shared, "Most of our customers walk to the restaurant after a long day at work, where they know they can walk back home after enjoying their favorite dinner and cocktails." All the participants conveyed that location was an essential factor in building and sustaining brand equity to increase customer retention. Location is a competitive advantage that differentiated these establishments from competitors, indicating a direct connection between the managers' desires to create a strong community presence. In alignment with Yang and Chui's research (2014), participants indicated that product differentiation increases brand awareness and brand image.

Aaker's (1991) brand equity model highlights brand awareness and brand image as the consumers' ability to recall given brands through the unique images and qualities associated with the brand. As a marketing strategy to retain customers, brand differentiation also relates to Aaker's (1991) findings on brand loyalty that it is cheaper to keep existing customers and sustain profits than it is to attract new customers. To echo Aaker's theory, Bihamta, Jayashree, Rezaei, Okumus, and Rahmi (2017) highlighted that managers can maximize the physical quality of a restaurant through ambience, pleasant aromas, appropriate lighting, and cleanliness. Moreover, the distinct physical details of a restaurant have an impact on both the quality of the food and the quality of the service (Bihamta et al., 2017). In this study, two of the three locations offer riverfront scenic views and prestigious outdoor dining as a complement to the exceptional food and service. Restaurateurs can generate customer loyalty by providing prestigious and unique restaurant environments to increase brand recognition and ensure quality service (Jin, Line, & Merkebu, 2015). For instance, Calvin stated,

> We know that we have a fascinating location in which guests take pride. We offer ourselves as a customer's annual event spot. Whether it is for a birthday, wedding, or anniversary, each year we anticipate guests returning for a different celebration on our premises.

During the review of company documents I encountered reports from one of the three managers regarding their monthly loyalty rewards program. Robert was the only one of the three managers who offered a rewards program to customers. The intention behind loyalty rewards programs is to retain existing customers, create customer loyalty, encourage repeat business, and enhance long-term relationships (Maier & Prusty, 2016; Maity & Gupta, 2016). Restaurant managers using loyalty rewards programs review these reports to monitor the success of the program and determine whether they should consider including additional promotions. Robert's use of a loyalty rewards program uniquely differentiated his restaurant because his establishment was the only participating establishment offering such a program. Baxter (2018) posited the importance of reducing the threat of rivals by enticing customers to become lifetime members of the organization.

Theme 1 aligns with Aaker’s brand equity theory as the conceptual framework as brand differentiation includes tangible and intangible components that consumers and competitors clearly identify as part of a brand. Aaker (1996) described differentiation as the bottom-line characteristic that results in brand recognition. This bottom-line key characteristic most often incorporates images that are unique to a brand (Aaker, 1996). Stahl et al. (2012) identified differentiation as one of four pillars of value that connect customers to the quality, reliability, and uniqueness of a brand. In this research study, the riverfront scenic views operate as staple trademarks for two of the three participants’ establishments that enhance the value of the products served and the quality of service provided. Hsu, Hung, and Tang (2012) pinpointed restaurant ambience and customer service as marketing strategies that build brand equity. Sean’s focus on offering a consistently high-quality product to customers indicates the importance of developing brand equity and building value. Sean’s strategy is in direct correlation with Abdullah et al.’s (2015) vision that differentiation also occurs when managers can command higher prices due to the caliber of products or services offered and consumers’ willingness to pay high prices to acquire those products. The participant responses support the conceptual framework in that each participant understands differentiation to be an essential component of brand equity.

Theme 2: Premium Products and Quality Experiences

The next theme to emerge from the data analysis was premium products and quality experiences. In this study, 100% of participants acknowledged the importance of consistently providing guests premium products and quality customer service experiences. Attri and Kushwaha (2018) provided research that suggested food consistency and service quality are critical to a restaurant's success. Customers frequent businesses with exceptional ratings for customer satisfaction and quality (Pattanayak, Koilakuntla, & Punyatoya, 2017). All three managers referenced reservation management platforms that track guest activities and trends. For example, both Calvin and Robert cited using Open Table. According to Calvin,

> Open Table gives us a lot of different reporting. We are able to track our guests and how often they come to the restaurant. Number of times visited, special occasions, business, pleasure, do they live in the area or out of town. We have a lot of data that we can analyze to help us understand if we are actually building our client base, is it flat, or is it going the other way.

Additionally, Robert shared that using restaurant management platforms provides opportunities for restaurants to receive recognition and additional marketing when they consistently provide quality experiences:

> We were awarded as the number-two dating spot in the state and top 50 date spots in the United States by Open Table, which is the largest reservation marketing platform for the restaurant industry. We see ourselves as a prestigious all-in-one dining and event facility to our customers.

Sean stated that his restaurant uses a reservation management platform to ensure guest satisfaction and sustainability:

> Resy, a restaurant management software, provides us with a comprehensive tool that collects data from our customers regarding their dining experience. Our food,

> ambience and plans for future visits are sample data points that allow us to inform our effectiveness. Where the data dictates change is necessary, we implement.

The use of reservation management platforms indicates that all three participants understand the importance of brand awareness on customer retention. While reviewing company documents, I learned that the participants relied heavily on their reservation and wait time reports to monitor their busiest operational hours. Information contained in these reports provides managers with details regarding factors that impact table turnover. The goal of each manager was to ensure guests did not have wait times longer than they expected or hosts communicated. Participants indicated the importance of exceeding expectations in this area. For example, Sean expressed his goal with wait times was to "under-promise and over-deliver."

The restaurant industry is an extremely competitive environment, in which business managers seek to attain favorable perceptions from customers, especially following a client experience (Kukanja, Omerzel, & Kodric, 2017). Emotionally inclined relationships between a consumer and a brand can enhance brand awareness and increase profitability (Webb & Roberts, 2016). Each of the study participants confirmed that customer satisfaction was based on the staff's ability to consistently provide customers with a personalized experience filled with quality service and premium products. Calvin stated, "We track guest preferences in a cloud document to personalize their experiences with likes, dislikes, allergies, favorite server, favorite beverage or wine, and special occasions." According to Robert at his restaurant, they not only maintain "a database that generates details and dates related to guest anniversary and birthdays, wine and champagne preferences to assist our staff with personalizing occasions," but also "send out email blasts specifically targeted at when your anniversary, birthday is and we invite you in. We assume you're going to spend special occasions and holidays with us." While conducting numerous direct observations, it became evident that providing customers with a touch of personalization during the dining experience is important for retaining customers in upscale full-service restaurant settings.

The participant's responses reaffirm Al-Tit's (2015) stance that the quality of an establishment's food and service, positively influences customer satisfaction, which in turn, positively impacts customer retention. Moreover, consumers ultimately gauge the overall superiority of products or services by what they perceive as quality (Hang et al., 2018). The average guest check at an upscale full-service restaurant with high priced menu items is roughly $50 (Hwang & Ok, 2013). I was able to observe each restaurant's menu items and pricing through the data collection phase, which confirmed dedicated high-priced menu items and guest checks without beverages ranging between $25 to $60. All three managers shared reports of their top-selling items, which they use to determine popular high demand menu items. The price consumers are willing to pay for a product or service suggests their perception of the product or service value (Gupta, 2014). My qualitative case study aligns with a quantitative case study conducted by Scozzafava, Contini, Romano, and Casini (2017) who found that participants in their study were also willing to pay premium prices for a premium meal and quality service.

Theme 2 also aligns with Aaker's brand equity model. Once managers establish brand awareness with customer's their efforts move into the realm of the customer's perceived quality of the brand. Perceived quality is the difference between the consumer's judgment of a product or service versus their actual perception of the product or service performance based on their expectations (Lewis & Chambers, 1989). According to Sean,

> One of our goals is to make our customers feel really "at home" when dining with us. It is critically important for our staff to become familiar with repeat customers because we address all guests by their names. Repeat guests become our family. Our guests are confident that their favorite menu items will always be delivered with perfection.

Robert also highlighted the importance of consistency, sharing

> Our customers know they will get consistency with each visit. Unlike mediocre restaurants, customers know that their favorite dish will taste the same on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday. All dishes are prepared with high-quality ingredients and high-quality service that customers have come to know over the years. Consistency makes us stand out from our competitors.

Mihailovic (2017) stated the objective of restaurant managers is to entice and retain customers. During exceptional dining experiences, customers are more likely to indulge in appetizers and entrees made from premium products. Upscale full-service restaurant establishments, like those represented in this study, are more likely to offer premium cocktail and alcoholic beverages from top-shelf brands. In addition to premium food and beverage offerings, customers are less likely to experience anything less than superior customer service during their dining experience. Raja, Irfan, Akhtar, Muhammad, & Asad (2014) discovered the positive impact service excellence, physical design, price, premium products, and quality food have on increasing customer satisfaction.

Theme 2 also coincided with brand equity theory, the conceptual framework of this study. The importance of offering premium products and quality experiences resonates with Keller's (1993) stance that a brand's image is the impression consumers have that differentiate products or services offered by various brands. One challenge of upscale restaurant managers is to maintain attractive images through product offerings. Espinosa et al. (2018) attributed factors, such as the dining atmosphere, food, and service quality, to the premium value consumers place on brand image. The results of this study align with Keller's (1993) example that suggested consumers may correlate high priced items with superior levels of product offerings, service quality, and prestige or status. Aaker (1991) presented a scenario in which loyal consumers would be willing to pay higher prices for a brand despite another brand offering similar products and services for a fraction of the cost. In Aaker's example, he compared consumers' willingness to pay 15% more for Coke products versus Pepsi. Furthermore, once a consumer forms an image of the brand it may be difficult to reverse their associations as the brand is more than a company logo, it is a unique set of values that infuses the consumers purchasing decisions and spurs the desire to become a repeat customer (Yi et al., 2018). The participant responses support the conceptual framework, and each participant indicated their understanding that premium products and quality service are essential components of brand equity.

Theme 3: Employee Engagement

Another theme to emerge from the data analysis was employee engagement. In this study, 100% of participants referenced the critical role employees played in improving brand equity. Employees that are courteous, pleasant, and assistive positively influence customer's perceptions and experiences, stimulating repeat business (Gupta, 2014). In this study, I observed that employee engagement focused more on the relational versus the functional aspects of the customer's dining experience. Calvin supported this when he said,

> Our goal is to develop genuine relationships between our employees and our guest. We have employees that have been with us for 15 plus years that guests invite annually to their beach and lake houses for weekends and holidays. Those are the experiences we want our employees to enjoy.

Alhelalat, Habiballah, & Twaissi (2017) added that diners indicated a greater level of guest satisfaction with restaurants that employed professionally trained employees and staff members that exhibited polite interactions and positive attitudes. Sean made it clear he understands the importance of employee engagement when he stated,

> Employee buy-in is critical to the success of any customer retention strategy. If team members feel their voice has been heard in developing the latest strategy or generating ideas to support the strategy, they will be more likely to implement full speed. It is critical to make every team member feel valued to realize the largest return from any strategy. This evidence is found in their attitudes regarding their work and the level at which they perform their specific duties. Ultimately, if

> employees are performing optimally, this efficiency transcends to our most important group – our customers.

Ong, Lee, & Ramayah (2018) posited that restaurant staffers must possess an intuitive awareness of the needs and requirements of customers to establish customer loyalty. To engage staff, Robert asserted that "Everyone in the company must understand protecting your brand, which requires employee buy-in." He further explained that managers obtain employee buy-in by "including their opinions on the product, service, and rewards program." At his restaurant, it was the employees who come up with the "frequent diner program," which he sites is just one example of how "When employees take ownership, they can take the idea and run with it because it's their value-added to the company." Calvin and Robert expressed views similar to those reported in a research study provided by Young, Glerum, Wang, and Joseph (2018), who asserted engaged employees are productive and perform above the standard, making them vital to an organization's effectiveness.

Three company documents enhanced the relevance of the employee engagement theme. These reports included: (a) customer loyalty rewards, (b) discounts and comps, and (c) sales by employee. Of the three managers, only Robert offered a customer loyalty rewards program; he expressed the usefulness of loyalty rewards reports to, "help gauge member signup and individual employee promotion of the loyalty reward program." All three managers shared discount and comp reports, each of which highlighted server and kitchen staff productivity, or the lack thereof. For example, excess discounts or comps could suggest the need to retrain staff members. All three managers also provided reports that individualized sales by employee and contained break downs of the individual servers upsells, comps, discounts, and overall efficiency. Individual sales reports also provided information regarding the employees' daily performance as a measurement of net sales. Each of these reports contains measurement tools upscale full-service restaurant managers can use to assist with determining the success or failure of a business.

The strategy of implementing employee engagement in the upscale full-service restaurant industry aligned with this study's conceptual framework of brand equity theory. Theme 3 aligned with the literature surrounding brand equity as a component of the customer's perceived quality of the brand. Perceived quality is often a determinant of consumer satisfaction levels (Iglesias & Guillen, 2004). Unique characteristics that result from intangible interactions between employees and customers that are overly dependent on the service provider's attitude and mood define the service industry (Sun & Ghiselli, 2010). Girard et al. (2017) contended that employee's attitudes are essential to the customer's overarching perspective of the firm. Developing employee engagement can assist in the delivery of quality service, which can increase customer satisfaction, thereby increasing brand equity.

Theme 4: Word of Mouth and Online Platforms

The final theme to emerge from this study was WOM and online marketing platforms. All three managers reported that their primary method of advertising takes place through WOM promotions, the use of social media, the company website, and restaurant management platforms. WOM and social media advertising are tools managers can use to retain a current customer base and attract a new customer base. Moreover, WOM also incorporates electronic WOM, which is a text-based internet platform that allows for an enormous quantity of consumer messages in real time (Tang, Mehl, Eastlick, He, & Card, 2016). Puzakova et al. (2013) published a research article in alignment with the idea that restaurant leaders who use WOM and online platforms to communicate with current customers, gain access to potential customers, and facilitate various promotions that could lead to purchases.

Three out of three participants found that WOM is highly beneficial in increasing the overall success of the business. Li, Yang, Yang, Xiong, Wu, and Tang (2018) defined WOM advertising as unpaid positive and negative comments from satisfied and unsatisfied customers about their overall experience and level of service a business offers. Sean stated, "Providing consistency in the dining experience yields the most valuable word of mouth advertising available." This response indicates Sean's understanding about the importance of ensuring positive customer experiences, thereby eliciting positive brand associations. Business managers use WOM advertising as a person-to-person communication tool that encourages communication about a brand, product, or service (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). Direct observation and company websites indicated that the participants used little to no traditional advertising methods, such as radio, print, and television, because of the high cost associated with such mediums and the inability to gauge return on investment. Robert stated,

> Our guests frequent our restaurant because they hear about our production and trust our production. We know that spending $15,000 a month on marketing is not

nearly as effective as a positive dining experience by 15 guests and the impact they have through word of mouth.

The literature supports limited use of traditional advertising methods and indicates that business leaders can effectively use WOM advertising to drive product growth and create stronger ties with the community (Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia, & Bell, 2015).

Social media and company websites also proved to be critical components to the success of my participants' profitability. Policies, such as *stay-at-home* and *social distancing,* imposed by many local government agencies, during COVID-19 pandemic affected normal business hours and forced some restaurant managers to cut staff because of temporary restaurant business closures and the banning of in-person dining experiences during the height of the pandemic (Courtemanche, Garuccio, Le, Pinkston, & Yelowitz, 2020). Restaurant managers faced the challenge of creating unique marketing strategies to generate business and increase sales volume during the temporary closures and bans on in-person dining. During the unique transition from closure to reopening, full-service dining room managers encouraged new challenges related to 6-foot social distancing guidelines, which resulted in only filling restaurants to 50% capacity or less (Courtemanche et al., 2020). The participants in this study all confirmed that during the pandemic, the use of online and carryout orders became a consistent source of restaurant revenue. Moreover, online order reports have proven to be more significant in the upscale full-service restaurant industry in an era where innovative technology strategies are filling the gaps in communication with customers and traditional business operations.

The effective use of social media technology and other online platforms supports managers' abilities to reach more potential customers, generating business growth (Balan & Rege, 2017). To garner the attention of customers, marketing managers should develop social media platforms with relatable content that will engage customers to increase brand awareness (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2018). Calvin understands this concept and explained, "We have someone that monitors our Instagram page and Facebook page to increase our reach." Similarly, Sean stated, "We are constantly soliciting customer feedback through all of our social media sites for improvement." Business leaders use social media to encourage customer engagement, seek customer feedback, and communicate frequently with their clientele (Balan & Rege, 2017). In alignment with research findings, Diffley, McCole, and Carvajal-Trujillo (2018) contended crowd-sourced, social media platforms can be used for customers to express their interest, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction with restaurants. Additionally, Robert understands that in addition to social media methods, it is important to maintain the company website indicating, "The up-keep of our company's website is imperative. Lack of attention to one's website may equate to the level of service guest should expect to receive from the dining experience."

Along with WOM, social media, and company websites, restaurant managers can also use restaurant management platforms to gather information regarding customer satisfaction and increase profitability. Horne (2015) posited that business leaders must implement an effective evaluation system to gauge the organization's performance based on customer feedback. In this research study, all three managers mentioned the use of a restaurant management platform to gather customer data, confirming the importance of implementing an effective evaluation system. Two of the managers indicated they use Open Table, which is a prominent comprehensive, central restaurant management platform used by managers to attract diners through a national dining network. Gregorash (2016) described Open Table as a mobile technology enhancer used by restaurant managers to increase the capacity of empty seats to generate daily revenue. Calvin highlighted the importance of using platforms, such as Open Table, during the COVID-19 pandemic indicating, “With COVID we are just scrambling to stay alive. Open Table gives us a lot of tools to get specific data about our guests [i.e. where do they come from and why are they coming here].” Robert further indicated the benefits of using restaurant management platforms, “We are a 4.7/5 on Venga [an entity of Open Table]. We look at key metrics and trends. People measure the food, service, ambience, and their likelihood to recommend us and/or return.” Popescu (2018) affirmed that a company with a favorable online reputation will result in increased visibility on search engines. In the retail industry, Gupta (2014) found if customers respond positively, sales volume and profitability will trend upward; contrarily, if customers respond negatively, operational indicators will trend downward.

While conducting direct observations, I noticed roughly 70% of all diners entered the restaurant with reservations for their dining experience. This observation confirms the managers’ reliance on key metrics and data trends provided through popular reservation marketing platforms. After an in-depth review of company documents, it was evident that all three restaurants had a consistent cliental. The literature indicated that the focus of

CRM is on developing and maintaining profitable relationships with customers through CRM software and other software platforms to improve customer experiences with organizations (Ata & Toker, 2012). In conjunction with CRM strategies, WOM communication is a highly influential marketing tool that futuristically alters customers' personal preferences and purchasing behaviors (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014; Dadzie et al., 2017). The development of profitable relationships can then increase brand loyalty, thereby increasing brand equity.

Theme 4 aligns with brand equity theory as the conceptual framework represents the overarching level of connection existing and potential customers have with the brand at different phases of the model. Aaker's (1991) philosophy regarding brand equity theory connects the perceived quality of a product directly to profitability. Business owners focus on perceived quality to gauge customer's perception of the brand (Chow et al., 2017). Existing customers' perceived quality of a brand is typically exercised through WOM and other online platforms, ultimately improving or diminishing a business's competitive barriers that can impact market share and price (Aaker, 1991). The findings from this theme also supported Fournier and Srinivasan's (2018) stance that brands with high perceptions of quality can attract new customers and retain current customers. Moreover, Alshurideh (2016) stated it is significantly cheaper to retain existing customers than to attract new customers. As a result of customer retention and improved brand equity, new customers tend to rely on WOM communications from previous consumers before engaging in new experiences from service providers (Yaman, 2018).

According to the literature, WOM and online platforms can significantly impact the success or failure of a business (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Brand awareness and brand association result from a buyer's ability to correlate specific reputations and product or service values associated with a brand (Aaker, 1991; Popescu, 2018). Therefore, a positive restaurant perception may impact a customer's overall opinion about a brand. Lee, Hallak, and Sardeshmukh (2016) opined that it is important for managers in the restaurant industry to create innovation through marketing with social networking sites, WOM, and online reservation platforms. Participants in this study confirmed that such efforts strengthen brand image and increase customer retention.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this qualitative multiple case study could help current, and future managers of upscale full-service restaurants in the Southeastern United States determine the best marketing strategies to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. Restaurant and hotel managers should create business goals that focus on attracting and retaining clients (Mihailovic, 2017), as well as increasing revenue (Wang, Lin, Kuo, & Weng, 2017). Managers that fail to improve brand equity and increase customer retention could potentially lose growth opportunities and market shares. The results of this study may contribute to professional business practice by providing successful marketing strategies that managers of upscale full-service restaurants can use to increase competitive advantage. Managers can use the findings of this study as a marketing guide for operating upscale full-service restaurants.

Although an average of 13% of U.S. household expenditures are on food, only 6% of these expenditures are for food consumed at restaurants (Wilson & Choi, 2019). Therefore, restaurant managers must implement successful marketing strategies to maximize competitive advantage to increase company profitability. Popescu (2018) recommended that for a business to grow revenue, company officials should engage with current and potential customers in a transactional manner. Experienced and novice restaurant managers implementing customized marketing solutions based on the results of this study may entice and retain customers through proven marketing techniques.

Some restaurant managers miss opportunities to create compelling and competitive dining experiences for new and existing customers (Kukanja et al., 2017). In contrast, the participants in this study demonstrated expertise in the ability to create intriguing restaurant experiences for their clientele through differentiation. Differentiation was the first theme to emerge from the findings of this study. Bolisani and Bratianu (2018), expressed the importance of differentiation to mitigate the influence of competition and help develop and maintain customer loyalty. Some of the elements that study participants contributed to the success of their restaurants were the ability to offer customers convenient neighborhood locations and unique riverfront scenic views. Running a successful business requires a quest for differentiation that leaders must acknowledge to better understand their customers to create value for them (Eggert, Ulaga, Frow, & Payne, 2018).

Upscale full-service restaurant managers should consider various other elements when attempting to implement successful strategies to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. The data collected for this study aligned with Genoveva and Siam's (2017) statement that restaurant managers have autonomy to distinguish which elements will set their restaurant apart from competitors. The second theme to emerge from the findings of this study was the importance of premium products and quality experiences. The study participants highlighted the importance of quality over quantity in the upscale full-service restaurant industry. Raja et al. (2014) conducted a study that found service and product quality, over price and ambience, were the essential elements for achieving customer satisfaction in successful full-service restaurants. An analysis of the data collected for this study included participant identification of effective strategies related to consistency when delivering products and services. Along with addressing customers by their names to ensure a personalized dining experience, delivering exceptional appetizers, entrees, beverages, and service during each visit was paramount to the success of each brand. Lee et al. (2016) acknowledged that attention to detail makes a substantial difference in a customer's overall service quality experience. The provision of exceptional customer service builds long-term relationships and enhances the restaurant's competitive advantage.

Another element that may prove applicable to managers in the upscale full-service restaurant industry is the commitment of the organization's employees. Employee engagement is critical to the success and productivity of an establishment (Saleh, 2017). Unengaged employees affect more than productivity because they weaken the organization's mission with disconnected actions that hinder business survivability efforts and overall performance (Ahammad, Tarba, Liu, & Glaister, 2016). Each of the study participants admitted that employees that did not take ownership of their tasks were typically less engaged in the company's vision. Employee satisfaction is in direct correlation to the level of service provided to create customer satisfaction and increase customer loyalty (Ogbonnaya & Valizade, 2018). For current and future managers, developing and implementing strategies that promote employee engagement may serve to increase positive employee energy, which may increase quality dining experiences amongst customers, thereby increasing customer retention and improving brand equity.

Managers in the upscale full-service restaurant industry and other business professionals could use the information shared by the research participants to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. Moreover, they could use the strategies shared by the research participants to improve their organizations' overall performance and profits. Consumers spend only 6% of their household expenditures at restaurants (Wilson & Choi, 2019), which is why I recommend managers in the upscale full-service restaurant industry consider capitalizing on the provision of premium products, superior employee engagement, and quality dining experiences. My goal with the findings of this research study is that managers in the restaurant industry will use the findings to develop new strategies to effectively increase customer retention to improve brand equity.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this qualitative multiple case study may contribute to positive social change by presenting upscale full-service restaurant managers in the southeastern United States with supplemental information regarding strategies they can use to increase customer retention and improve brand equity. Restaurants are pivotal in the creation of job opportunities and economic growth (Halabi & Lussier, 2014). Sales in the restaurant industry will continue to grow because of an expanding economy in which consumer demand for the use of restaurants is high and in support of spending (The National Restaurant Association, 2017). The results of this study may increase the success of restaurant owners, which may increase local, state, and national sales and tax revenue, ultimately adding value to the economy.

The findings of this study may promote positive social change by providing upscale full-service managers supplemental information on strategies used to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. The implications for positive social change include the potential to support the welfare of the local citizens and owners of upscale full-service restaurants across the southeastern United States, providing strategies necessary to improve job sustainability, encourage job creation, and contributing to economic growth. Further positive social change may occur as restaurants are able to increase clientele and stay in business, thereby creating consistent revenue for local communities.

Recommendations for Action

The findings of this research study may be significant to both prevailing and future upscale full-service restaurant managers through providing strategies to help them retain customers and improve brand equity. Based on the findings, I have three recommendations for existing and aspiring upscale full-service restaurant managers seeking to improve brand equity (a) never cut the quality of food and service for profitability, (b) create exceptional customer experiences, and (c) create an online communication presence. The first recommendation for upscale full-service restaurant owners is to never reduce the quality of food and service to increase profitability. Participants postulated their clientele would prefer to spend increased menu prices rather than forgo quality food and premium products. Restaurant managers who want to retain customers and improve brand equity should strive to remain consistent in their delivery of premium products and services.

The second recommendation for upscale full-service restaurant owners is to create exceptional customer experiences. The results of this study were in line with Kim and Kim's (2004) observation that full-service restaurant managers who develop and deploy strategies to ensure a strong impression of their brand implant in the consumers' memories through favorable experiences. At the initial stage of the brand equity model is brand awareness, in which consumers are unaware of the brand or its name (Chow et al., 2017). At this stage, upscale full-service restaurant managers should create an awareness of their brand through positive experiences with customers that are associated with quality products or services. Therefore, it is my recommendation that restaurant leaders highlight the company's mission and vision to provide customers with an exceptional overall dining experience.

The third recommendation for upscale full-service restaurateurs is to create an online communication presence that allows customers to review, make suggestions, and provide their opinions about the restaurant. WOM communication is a highly influential marketing tool (Dadzie et al., 2017). Participants indicated that new customers typically visited their establishment as a referral from a loyalist that frequents the restaurant.

Archer-Brown et al. (2017) reported that over 15 billion conversations on brand impressions occur amongst consumers in the United States weekly, with approximately 75% occurring face-to-face, 15% via telephone, and 10% online. Therefore, it is my recommendation that restaurateurs implement a strong online presence to mitigate WOM communication, with a dedicated marketing team or professional to provide prompt real time customer feedback and interactions.

The targeted audience of this qualitative multiple case study includes (a) the participants (b) upscale full-service restaurant leaders, (c) stakeholders, (d) community leaders, and (e) scholars pursuing research on the full-service restaurant industry. The individuals may gain insight from these results that could potentially add substance to the strategies they use to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. To disseminate the findings of this study, I will (a) present an article for publication to a peer-reviewed hospitality or management journal, (b) volunteer for a business seminar or conference, (c) attend business networking events, and (d) submit this dissertation to databases such as ProQuest.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to contribute new knowledge to the current body of literature surrounding how managers of upscale full-service restaurants can increase customer retention to improve brand equity using Keller's brand equity theory as the conceptual framework. The population for this study included senior- and mid-level managers from three upscale full-service restaurants in the southeastern United States. From that population, a sample size of three senior-level managers emerged, and I obtained qualitative data through (a) virtual semistructured interviews with member checking follow-up interviews, (b) in-person direct observations, (c) reflective journal notes, (d) company documents and (e) other marketing material related to brand equity and customer loyalty strategies.

Limitations are negative characteristics that extend beyond the control of the researcher that may alter the findings and generalizability of a study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016; O'Leary, 2018). The qualitative method and design that I used in this research study was not free of inherited limitations. The first limitation in this study was my lack of research experience. Being a novice researcher, potentially limited the depth and breadth of the research and analysis pertaining to this study. Saxena (2017) noted that novice researchers often struggle with gaining an in-depth comprehension of themes from their qualitative research study. I recommend that experienced qualitative researchers in the field conduct future studies. These experts could potentially gain more in-depth insight from participants, thereby correlating the data more accurately to the themes.

The second limitation of this study was the sample size. In qualitative research, there is no rule to sample size (Yin, 2016). The population of this study consisted of three managers of upscale full-service restaurants. Small population sizes can often prevent generalizability of the findings in comparison to a larger population. Researchers should consider further research opportunities using a larger sample size that includes upscale full-service managers in metropolitan areas outside the southeastern region of the United States.

The third limitation of this study was the lack of participant diversity from the foodservice industry. The target population for this multiple case study consisted of a population that met the study criteria in three upscale restaurants. Researchers should consider further research opportunities that will generate data from managers in other sectors of the restaurant industry. This research could include managers in restaurant sectors such as casual dining, quick-service, family dining, and quick-casual.

The fourth limitation of this study was the geographical location. The geographic location of this study was in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States, which may limit the transferability of these results to other restaurants across the United States. Researchers should consider further research opportunities in a broader geographical scope, which could reveal a broad range of successful strategies to increase customer retention to improve brand equity.

Finally, it may be beneficial for researchers to expound on this research study by applying alternative qualitative research designs, like phenomenology or ethnography research designs. Conducting a quantitative research design may also generate additional perspectives and reveal large scale patterns and prove or disprove existing theories (Leavy, 2017). In comparison, a mixed methods research design may be beneficial for analyzing questions and hypotheses (Yin, 2018) to explore or examine further strategies used by upscale full-service restaurant managers.

Reflections

The Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program at Walden University has been challenging, enlightening, and rewarding. Upon entering the program, I was unaware of the true intensity associated with a doctoral journey. I found the overall process to be a daunting task filled with what appeared to be insurmountable highs and lows. My inability to achieve and sustain a healthy school, work, and life balance was often the most agonizing component of the process. Despite my many frustrations, fears, and challenges I stayed the course and finally achieved the pinnacle of my academic career.

The choice to study the customer retention strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to improve brand equity resulted from a personal and professional international love for the hospitality industry and a plethora of memorable travel and dining experiences. Before landing on the restaurant industry, I considered the airline, hotel, and international travel industries. Careful consideration regarding the ease of access to participants to gain in-depth data finally solidified my decision to focus on restaurant managers. From personal experience and specific attention to the levels of customer service within the various sectors of the restaurant industry, I then narrowed my scope to the upscale full-service sector. By conducting this research study, I gained valuable insight about a practical business problem from a manager’s perspective on implementing these strategies. This research process allowed me to conduct a valid research study that will benefit me in future academic and professional pursuits.

At the onset of my doctoral study proposal, I assumed that I would locate a wealth of seminal works related to my topic and supporting my problem statement. After exhausting countless hours and filtering through various research alternatives, I realized there was a lack of previously published peer-reviewed literature on the restaurant industry specific to upscale full-service restaurants and their use of marketing strategies. In addition, I found a gap in the literature regarding the table service restaurant industry. Needless to say, I completely underestimated the amount of literature surrounding the restaurant industry. With little to no experience or knowledge of the restaurant industry, I did not have any personal biases that impeded my data collection or analysis processes. As a novice to the industry, my peaked level of interest and acceptance of the data collected resulted in a study free of preconceived ideas or values from the participants and situations observed.

During this experience, I was surprised by the overwhelming response from participants and their willingness to participate in the research study. While I thoroughly enjoyed interviewing the candidates, I underestimated the tediousness associated with the data collection, analyzation, and transcription process. Matriculating through this arduous DBA process, has equipped me to be more astute academically, personally, and professionally with a more holistic understanding of the commitment to excellence associated with the doctoral research process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies that upscale full-service restaurant managers use to increase customer retention to improve brand equity. The findings of this study revealed that successful upscale full-service restaurant managers know how to combat customer retention with strategies that create sustained competitive advantage. Four themes emerged from this study: (a) brand differentiation through competitive advantage, (b) premium products and quality experiences, (c) employee engagement, and (d) word of mouth and online platforms. Ultimately, the marketing strategies business leaders use can significantly influence the overall profitability of the business. Managers of upscale full-service restaurants encounter challenges related to retaining customers in a competitive global economy to improve brand equity. This research study helped me conclude that such managers may use strategies related to exceptional cuisine, superior service, personalization, and employee engagement, which are vital elements in the restaurant industry to build brand equity in upscale dining experiences and fulfill the customers' expectations.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What you will do	**What you will say—script**
Introduce the interview and set the stage—often over a meal or coffee	*Good morning/afternoon, my name is Shamilleon Payne. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me in an effort to assist with my study. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. During this time, I will inquire about strategies you have implemented as a leader to increase customer retention to improve brand equity at _______.* *The purpose of my study is to explore strategies that increase customer retention to improve brand equity in upscale full-service restaurants similar to ________.*
Review aspects of consent form. Ensure the participant understands the content of the form and signs all of the forms. Wait for signatures.	**Consent Forms** *Before we get started, please sign the informed consent form as an indication that you agree to speak with me about your experiences with implementing customer retention strategies for use in my doctoral study.* *I will walk you through each section of the informed consent form.* *Additionally, I will be the only person with access to recordings and notes that I gather today. I will use pseudonyms in my study and any publications that emerge from my study to protect the company and employee identities to strengthen confidentiality.* *Again, thank you for agreeing to participate and share your experiences.*
Ask to record the interview and ensure the participant states their approval.	**Recording Permission** *To facilitate my notetaking, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. The purpose of the recording is to allow me the ability to actively focus while maximizing the amount of details received from our conversation. Is that okay?* **If yes:** Thank you! Please feel free to request the termination of the recorder at any point if you prefer to keep something discussed off record.

	If no: Thank you! I will only take notes of our conversation.
Ensure participant understands they can ask questions at any time throughout the interview.	**Initial Question** *Before we begin, do you have any questions?* **If yes:** Take a moment to address any questions. **If no:** If any questions arise, please feel free to ask them at any point in the study. I am more than happy to discuss your questions.
Watch for non-verbal cues. Paraphrase as needed. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth.	1. Based upon your organizations experience, how do your customer retention strategies improve your restaurant's brand equity?
	2. What customer retention strategies have you used to increase the number of times customers visit the restaurant which improved brand equity?
	3. What, if any, customer retention strategies have you implemented that have increase customers frequenting the restaurant during different hours of operation?
	4. What were the key barriers to implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
	5. How did you address the key barriers that impeded your organization implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
	6. Based upon your organization's experience, how have the employees at your restaurant contributed to customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
	7. How, if at all, did branding strategies contribute to increased customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
	8. Based upon your organization's experience, how did your organization measure the effectiveness of the customer retention strategies that you implemented to improve brand equity?
	9. How did customer retention contribute to improved brand equity?
	10. What additional information can you provide regarding your restaurant's success in developing and implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity?
Reflect on answered or unanswered interview questions that need clarity after probing.	**Reflection** You mentioned earlier that _______. Can you clarify______?

Wrap up interview thanking participant	**Interview Conclusion** I would like to thank you for the opportunity to gain a clear explanation and understanding of how you increased customer retention to improve brand equity at _________.
Schedule follow-up member checking interview	**Member Checking Interview Request** While I know your time is valuable, I would appreciate an opportunity to confirm the responses that I have recorded based on our initial interview by scheduling a follow-up interview. At that time, I will provide you with a summary of your interview for review. **If yes:** Do you have a specific date and time that you prefer? Again, thank you for your cooperation and assistance with my study. **If no:** Thank you again for your cooperation and assistance with my doctoral study.
Introduce follow-up interview and set the stage	**Member Checking Interview** Again, thank you for agreeing to a follow-up interview with me. This interview will allow me verify I have a firm understanding of your responses from our initial interview. I have prepared a summary of your responses for you to review and provide any additional comments or corrections to my interpretations.
Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question Bring in probing questions related to other information that you may have found—note the information must be related so that you are probing and adhering to the IRB approval. Walk through each question, read the interpretation and ask: Did I miss anything? Or, what would you like to	**Follow-up Interview Synthesis** Below you will find a summary of your responses from our initial interview. Please confirm my interpretations are correct and let me know if anything needs to be edited.
	1. Based upon your organizations experience, how do your customer retention strategies improve your restaurant's brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	2. What customer retention strategies have you used to increase the number of times customers visit the restaurant which improved brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	3. What, if any, customer retention strategies have you implemented that have increase customers frequenting the restaurant during different hours of operation? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*

add?	4. What were the key barriers to implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	5. How did you address the key barriers that impeded your organization implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	6. Based upon your organization's experience, how have the employees at your restaurant contributed to customer retention strategies to improve brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	7. How, if at all, did branding strategies contribute to increased customer retention strategies to improve brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	8. Based upon your organization's experience, how did your organization measure the effectiveness of the customer retention strategies that you implemented to improve brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	9. How did customer retention contribute to improved brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*
	10. What additional information can you provide regarding your restaurant's success in developing and implementing customer retention strategies to improve brand equity? *Insert one paragraph succinct synthesis of the interpretation.*

Appendix B: Observation Protocol

Observation Protocol

The purpose of this observation protocol is to provide a step action table (job aide, checklist) to help you stay focused on the data and other details that observe in the setting.

Directions: To start each observation, write a comprehensive description the setting following the table below. Using the table on the next page, note the approximate time frames that you make the observations along with notes describing what you see occurring and any other details that you consider to be important. After the observation, review your notes and begin to identify key points (concepts and ideas) that may help you later in the data analysis.

Tentative Schedule	(i.e., M,W,F, 4:00pm-8:00pm) for 3 weeks
Date:	
The Background: Physical setting (Describe in thick rich detail what it looks like, sounds like, and any other details. Record what you know about the participants and their roles, if known). What participants are there? What are the participants doing?	
The Participants: How do they interact with others? What are they wearing? What are they saying? What does their body language tell you?	
The Action: What happens? What is the sequence?	

Is there a cause and effect? If so, provide details.	

(a) Time:	(b) Observation: